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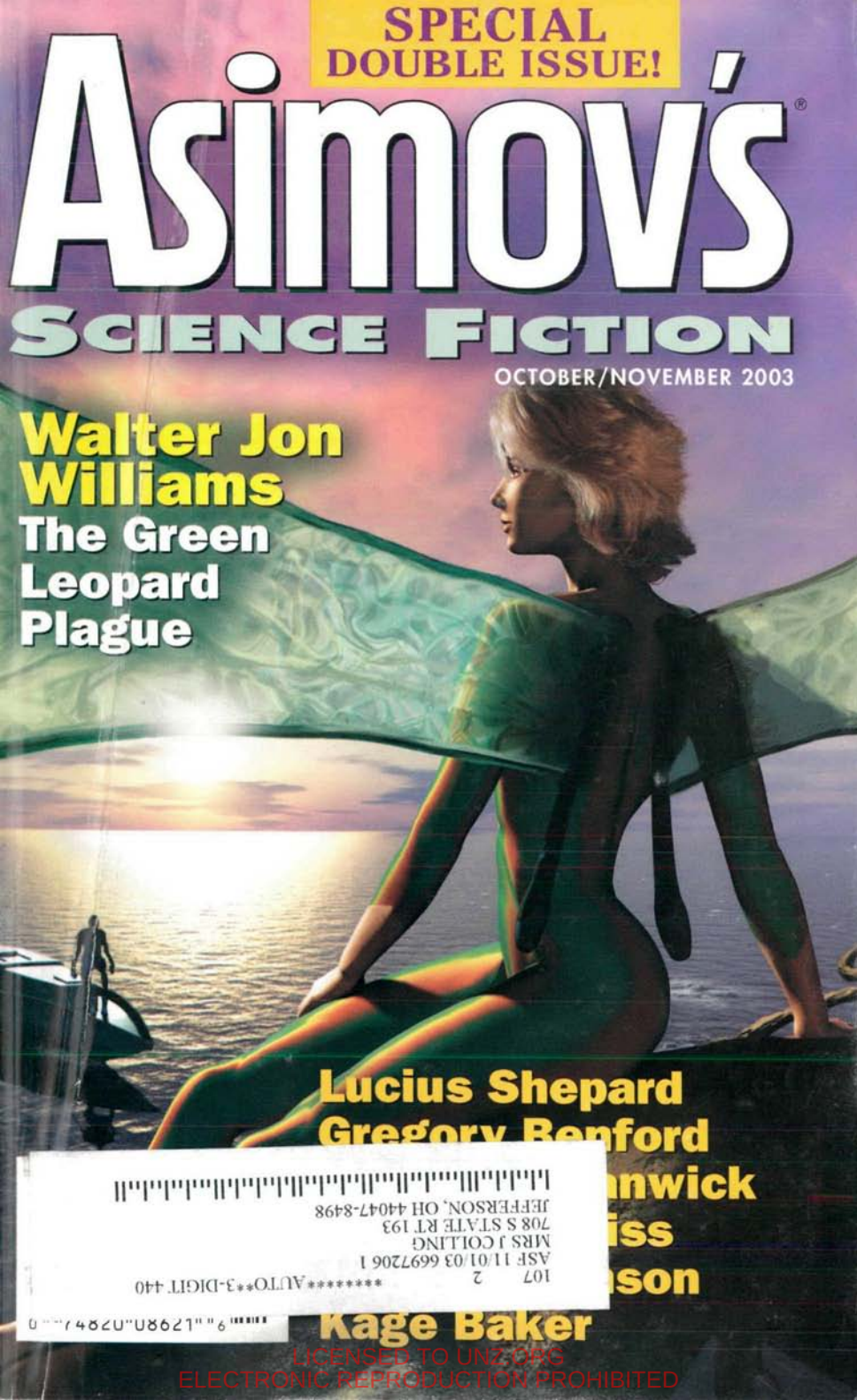
Asimov's Science Fiction

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2003



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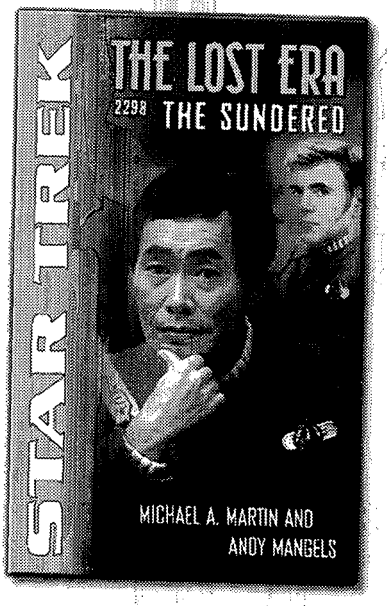

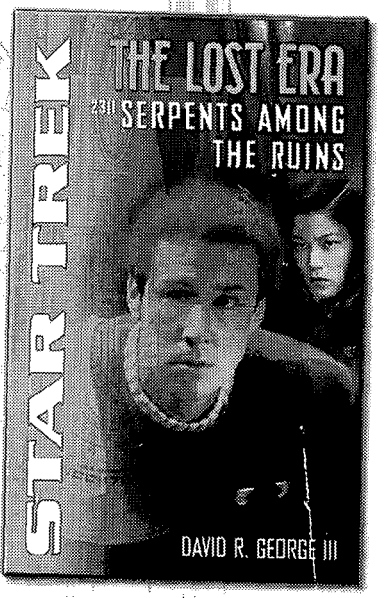

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OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2003

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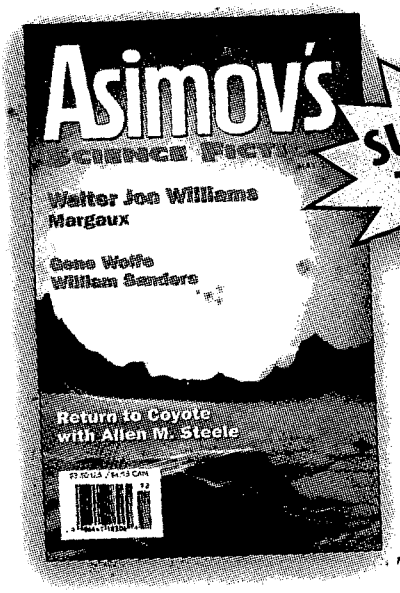

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE CLEVE CARTMILL AFFAIR: TWO

Last month I told the tale of how in the wartime year of 1944, while American scientists in New Mexico were planning the first A-bomb, John W. Campbell of *Astounding Science Fiction* published a story called "Deadline," by Cleve Cartmill, which described in great detail how to construct such a bomb. Fearing that there had been some sort of security leak, the War Department sent a Counter-Intelligence Corps agent to have a little chat with Mr. Campbell.

In the course of that conversation, Campbell insisted that neither he nor Cartmill had any inside information, that the bomb design depicted in "Deadline" was based entirely on information that had been publicly available for the past four or five years. But Riley, the agent, still suspected that Campbell was concealing his sources, and embarked on clandestine observations of Campbell's activities.

He discovered that Campbell was friendly with Edgar Norton, an engineer doing classified research at Bell Labs in New York City. Norton had no involvement with the A-bomb project himself, but Bell Labs did, and perhaps he had learned something about it from friends there. Norton and Campbell had had lunch recently. Was that when the scientist had slipped the bomb secrets to the SF editor?

Riley interviewed Norton, who said he had read "Deadline" and had told Campbell that he regarded it as "utterly fantastic" and "childish." In any case the technical aspects of the story had long been matters of common knowledge, said Norton. If Campbell or Cartmill had stumbled on anything that was actually the subject of current military research, it must have been purely by coincidence.

But the Bell Labs man did reveal that there had been a third man present at that lunch: Will F. Jenkins, who as "Murray Leinster" had written a great deal of SF for Campbell's magazine. He too was interviewed. Jenkins had had his own brush with military censors as a result of his story "Four Little Ships" (*Astounding,* November 1942), involving a method of disrupting enemy shipping through underwater sound transmission that happened to be under actual military development. He also revealed knowledge of how a uranium bomb would work, and he too said that such information was available to anyone who kept up to date with standard technical journals.

Jenkins' daughter, though, was a scientist employed by the Raytheon Corporation in Massachusetts, and Jenkins revealed that he and his daughter "had conducted experiments designed to acquire quantities of atomic copper." They had turned this material over to "Lt. Azimoff, United States Navy, for analysis at Columbia University." This "Azimoff," who was not a lieutenant at all and spelled his name

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the way you see it on the cover of this magazine, had now moved along to the Philadelphia Navy Yard, where he was doing wartime scientific work in a group that also included two more of Campbell's regular writers, L. Sprague de Camp and Robert A. Heinlein. And Heinlein was known to be a friend of Cleve Cartmill!

Was somebody passing classified A-bomb information to Heinlein, who was sending it along to Cartmill? For a moment, things looked pretty bad for Campbell and his crew of star writers, security-wise, although Messrs. Asimov, Jenkins, Heinlein, and De Camp had given no previous evidence of being traitors—and, in any case, turning war secrets into second-rate SF stories might seem, to the dispassionate eye, a very odd way indeed of betraying one's country. But Heinlein, Asimov, and De Camp were never questioned about the Cartmill affair. The investigation now turned to the unfortunate Mr. Cartmill.

Cartmill was a Californian, thirty-six years old in 1944, married, and a father. He had worked as a newspaperman, a radio operator, an accountant, and at various other things, but currently was supporting himself writing fiction for pulp magazines. Military Intelligence began by pressing Cartmill's letter-carrier into service as a secret agent. The postman, who read SF and knew that Cartmill wrote it, drew him into a conversation about "Deadline" and was told, according to an Intelligence report dated March 20, 1944, that it "was written from material he has obtained from general reading matter on scientific subjects, also from similar stories he has read, together with a fair working knowledge of physics which he possesses." He did not think a great deal of the story, telling the postman that it "stinks," and was much more interested in talking about one that he had lately sold to the high-paying slick magazine *Collier's*.

The part about Cartmill drawing on his own knowledge of physics contradicted Campbell's claim that Cartmill knew very little science and had received all the A-bomb material from him. A more formal investigation seemed necessary. The chief of police of Cartmill's home town reported that Cartmill had no police record. The FBI had no dossier for him either. But the files of the Office of Naval Intelligence revealed that Cartmill's father, having invented a new kind of machine gun and been unsuccessful in an effort to sell it to the War Department, had tried to sell it to the Japanese shortly before the outbreak of World War II. But there was nothing illegal about that, nor had Cleve Cartmill been involved in it in any way. And, in fact, the elder Cartmill was currently employed at the California Shipbuilding Corporation, doing war work.

Special Agent R.S. Killough now visited Cartmill himself, using a pretext unlikely to arouse suspicion in Cartmill that he was under investigation. In a report dated March 16, Killough described Cartmill as "well educated and nicely dressed," and willing to talk freely about all aspects of his writing career. Once again he brushed "Deadline" aside as a minor work and spoke of his hope of writing for "better" magazines than the SF pulps.

Killough felt that Cartmill was intelligent enough to have invented the "Deadline" scenario out of

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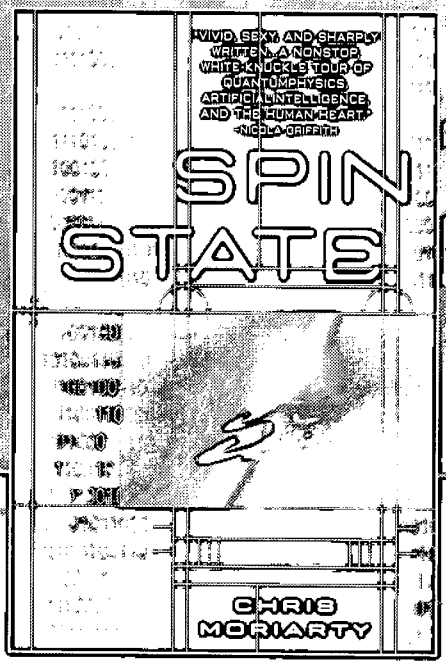
SHE'S HACKED HER MEMORY TO PASS AS HUMAN. BUT NO UPGRADE CAN PREPARE HER FOR THE FUTURE.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existing non-classified materials—especially when Cartmill revealed that in 1927 he had worked for the American Radium Products Company, a job requiring him to study the properties of radioactive elements in detail. Killough, who referred to Cartmill as "Cleve" in his report, plainly liked him—whereas Riley, the New York agent, had found Campbell irritating and arrogant, calling him "somewhat of an egotist." The New York Intelligence office still was troubled by the case. The link with Heinlein had now turned up, potentially connecting Cartmill with Jenkins and the Bell Labs researchers. The April 11, 1944, Intelligence report on Cartmill also said, darkly but without explanation, "It is also revealed that Cartmill has been receiving letters from Seattle, Washington." Early in May, therefore, Killough went back to Cartmill for a specific discussion of "Deadline."

This time Cartmill admitted that Campbell had indeed helped him with the scientific background of the story, saying that he had claimed sole responsibility earlier "because of his own pride and prestige"—"he would not admit to the general public that he had extracted, word for word, information conveyed by another person." But he also repeated an earlier assertion that "almost anyone who had read a physics textbook would have the facts available." It was Agent Killough's conclusion that Cartmill "was honest, sincere, and reliable. He made every effort to be cooperative and did not at any time give any impression of evasiveness or reluctance."

And here the great spy quest began to fizzle out.

It was clear by now that Campbell's *Astounding* had been publishing stories about atomic energy since 1940, beginning with Heinlein's "Blowups Happen," all of them based on widely available material. "Deadline" was just the latest such story. No security leak was involved.

On the other hand, a top-secret program to develop an atomic bomb *was* under way in New Mexico, and the War Department saw good reason to keep discussion of such things out of magazines, even SF magazines. On May 6, 1944, Lt. Col. W.B. Parsons of the Intelligence and Security Division at the laboratory in Oak Ridge, Tennessee where production of uranium for the bomb was taking place, wrote to Lt. Col. John Lansdale of the Military Censorship Department in Washington that "Although the content of the [Cartmill] article is not considered a violation of code of the wartime practices for publication, as the article is purely fictional . . . the inference appears that the country is doing work in such field. Further, such articles can well provoke public speculation. . . ." Parsons suggested that Campbell and his employers, Street & Smith Publications, be reminded of a confidential Code of Wartime Practices that had been circulated to editors and broadcasters in June 1943, forbidding dissemination of any information regarding war experiments involving "atom smashing, atomic energy, atomic fission, atomic splitting, or any of their equivalents." If Street & Smith refused to cooperate, pressure could be brought to bear—in particular, withdrawing the magazine's right to mail copies to its subscribers, which would put it out of business.

Lt. Col. Lansdale asked Jack

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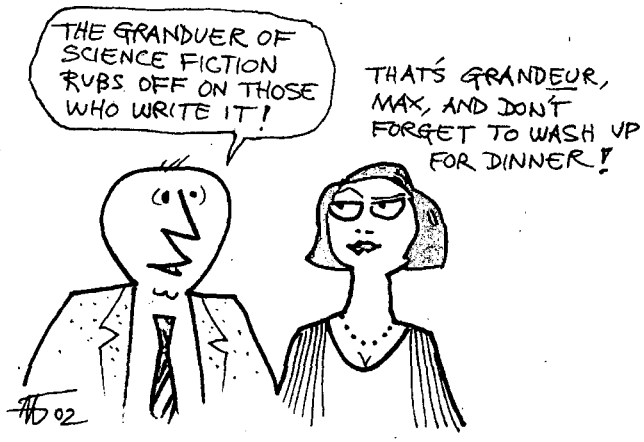
Lockhart of the Office of Censorship to handle the "Deadline" situation. Lockhart, as he told Lansdale on May 15, "spent an unpleasant half hour reading this story which relates the experience of a tailed individual named Ybor on the planet Cathor." He made little sense out of it, but he could see that its "pseudo-scientific discussions" verged on forbidden territory and something needed to be done. To his credit, this sort of censorship made him uncomfortable: "We have always been reluctant to interfere with fictional material because of the impossibility of fettering the mind of man," he said. But, "as much as I tremble over venturing into this field," he got in touch with Campbell and asked him not to publish "additional material relating to subjects involved in our special request of June 28, 1943."

Unfortunately, that's where the file ends. Campbell always maintained that he told the censors that if he deleted all references to atomic power from his magazine, his clever readers would surely deduce that a hush-hush atom-bomb project was in the works. Maybe so. Certainly I can find no further stories about U-235 bombs in the next dozen or so issues of *Astounding,* though a Fritz Leiber story speaks of a world devastated by "subtronic power," a Raymond F. Jones novel mentions "gigantic atomic projectors" being used as weapons, and a Lewis Padgett story about mutants is set in a world that has been devastated by atomic war.

"Deadline" is often cited today as an example of science fiction's ability to predict the future. As Campbell went to such pains to demonstrate long ago, it did no such thing. It simply recycled existing data. A far better example of prophetic power is Heinlein's "Solution Unsatisfactory" of 1941, in which atomic bombs are developed by the United States and the quasi-Soviet "Eurasian Union," a brief atomic war breaks out that we win, and America thereafter finds it necessary to impose a military dictatorship over the rest of the world to prevent future nuclear warfare. Now *there's* true extrapolation by a master of the form! ○



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THE GREEN LEOPARD PLAGUE

Walter Jon Williams

Walter Jon Williams's last story for *Asimov's* was "Margaux" (May 2003), an excerpt from his new novel *The Praxis,* which has just been released by Avon. "The Green Leopard Plague," inspired by a recent trip to the island Pacific, is set in the same future and features some of the same characters as his award-nominated tale "Lethe" (September 1997). An acquaintance with "Lethe" is not necessary to appreciate this story.

Kicking her legs out over the ocean, the lonely mermaid gazed at the horizon from her perch in the overhanging banyan tree.

The air was absolutely still and filled with the scent of night flowers. Large fruit bats flew purposefully over the sea, heading for their daytime rest. Somewhere a white cockatoo gave a penetrating squawk. A starling made a brief flutter out to sea, then came back again. The rising sun threw up red-gold sparkles from the wavetops and brought a brilliance to the tropical growth that crowned the many islands spread out on the horizon.

The mermaid decided it was time for breakfast. She slipped from her hanging canvas chair and walked out along one of the banyan's great limbs. The branch swayed lightly under her weight, and her bare feet found sure traction on the rough bark. She looked down to see the deep blue of the channel, distinct from the turquoise of the shallows atop the reefs.

She raised her arms, poised briefly on the limb, the ruddy light of the sun glowing bronze on her bare skin, and then pushed off and dove head-first into the Philippine Sea. She landed with a cool impact and a rush of bubbles.

Her wings unfolded, and she flew away.

* * *

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After her hunt, the mermaid—her name was Michelle—cached her fishing gear in a pile of dead coral above the reef, and then ghosted easily over the sea grass with the rippled sunlight casting patterns on her wings. When she could look up to see the colossal, twisted tangle that was the roots of her banyan tree, she lifted her head from the water and gulped her first breath of air.

The Rock Islands were made of soft limestone coral, and tide and chemical action had eaten away the limestone at sea level, undercutting the stone above. Some of the smaller islands looked like mushrooms, pointed green pinnacles balanced atop thin stems. Michelle's island was larger and irregularly shaped, but it still had steep limestone walls undercut six meters by the tide, with no obvious way for a person to clamber from the sea to the land. Her banyan perched on the saucer-edge of the island, itself undercut by the sea.

Michelle had arranged a rope elevator from her nest in the tree, just a loop on the end of a long nylon line. She tucked her wings away—they were harder to retract than to deploy, and the gills on the undersides were delicate—and then slipped her feet through the loop. At her verbal command, a hoist mechanism lifted her in silence from the sea to her resting place in the bright green-dappled forest canopy.

She had been an ape once, a siamang, and she felt perfectly at home in the treetops.

During her excursion, she had speared a yellowlip emperor, and this she carried with her in a mesh bag. She filleted the emperor with a blade she kept in her nest, and tossed the rest into the sea, where it became a subject of interest to a school of bait fish. She ate a slice of one fillet raw, enjoying the brilliant flavor, sea and trembling pale flesh together, then cooked the fillets on her small stove, eating one with some rice she'd cooked the previous evening and saving the other for later.

By the time Michelle finished breakfast, the island was alive. Geckoes scurried over the banyan's bark, and coconut crabs sidled beneath the leaves like touts offering illicit downloads to passing tourists. Out in the deep water, a flock of circling, diving black noddies marked where a school of skipjack tuna was feeding on swarms of bait fish.

It was time for Michelle to begin her day as well. With sure, steady feet, she moved along a rope walkway to the ironwood tree that held her satellite uplink in its crown, straddled a limb, took her deck from the mesh bag she'd roped to the tree, and downloaded her messages.

There were several journalists requesting interviews—the legend of the lonely mermaid was spreading. This pleased her more often than not, but she didn't answer any of the queries. There was a message from Darton, which she decided to savor for a while before opening. And then she saw a note from Dr. Davout, and opened it at once.

Davout was, roughly, twelve times her age. He'd actually been carried for nine months in his mother's womb, not created from scratch in a nanobed like almost everyone else she knew. He had a sib who was a famous astronaut, a McEldowny Prize for his *Lavoisier and His Age*, and a red-haired wife who was nearly as well-known as he was. A couple of years ago, Michelle had attended a series of his lectures at the College of

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Mystery, and been interested despite her specialty being, strictly speaking, biology.

He had shaved off the little goatee he'd worn when she'd last seen him, which Michelle considered a good thing. "I have a research project for you, if you're free," the recording said. "It shouldn't take too much effort."

Michelle contacted him at once. He was a rich old bastard with a thousand years of tenure and no notion of what it was to be young in these times, and he'd pay her whatever outrageous fee she asked.

Her material needs at the moment were few, but she wouldn't stay on this island forever.

Davout answered right away. Behind him, working at her own console, Michelle could see his red-haired wife Katrin.

"Michelle!" Davout said, loudly enough for Katrin to know who'd called without turning around. "Good!" He hesitated, and then his fingers formed the mudra for <concern>. "I understand you've suffered a loss," he said.

"Yes," she said, her answer delayed by a second's satellite lag.

"And the young man—?"

"Doesn't remember."

Which was not exactly a lie, the point being *what* was remembered.

Davout's fingers were still fixed in <concern>. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Her own fingers formed an equivocal answer. "I'm getting better." Which was probably true.

"I see you're not an ape any more."

"I decided to go the mermaid route. New perspectives, all that." And welcome isolation.

"Is there any way we can make things easier for you?"

She put on a hopeful expression. "You said something about a job?"

"Yes." He seemed relieved not to have to probe further—he'd had a realdeath in his own family, Michelle remembered, a chance-in-a-billion thing, and perhaps he didn't want to relive any part of that.

"I'm working on a biography of Terzian," Davout said.

". . . And his Age?" Michelle finished.

"And his *Legacy*." Davout smiled. "There's a three-week period in his life where he—well, he drops right off the map. I'd like to find out where he went—and who he was with, if anyone."

Michelle was impressed. Even in comparatively unsophisticated times such as that inhabited by Jonathan Terzian, it was difficult for people to disappear.

"It's a critical time for him," Davout went on. "He'd lost his job at Tulane, his wife had just died—realdeath, remember—and if he decided he simply wanted to get lost, he would have all my sympathies." He raised a hand as if to tug at the chin-whiskers that were no longer there, made a vague pawing gesture, then dropped the hand. "But my problem is that when he resurfaces, everything's changed for him. In June, he delivered an undistinguished paper at the Athenai conference in Paris, then vanished. When he surfaced in Venice in mid-July, he didn't deliver the paper he was scheduled to read, instead he delivered the first version of his Cornucopia Theory."

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Michelle's fingers formed the mudra <highly impressed>. "How have you tried to locate him?"

"Credit card records—they end on June 17, when he buys a lot of euros at American Express in Paris. After that, he must have paid for everything with cash."

"He really *did* try to get lost, didn't he?" Michelle pulled up one bare leg and rested her chin on it. "Did you try passport records?"

<No luck.> "But if he stayed in the European Community he wouldn't have had to present a passport when crossing a border."

"Cash machines?"

"Not till after he arrived in Venice, just a couple of days prior to the conference."

The mermaid thought about it for a moment, then smiled. "I guess you need me, all right."

<I concur> Davout flashed solemnly. "How much would it cost me?"

Michelle pretended to consider the question for a moment, then named an outrageous sum.

Davout frowned. "Sounds all right," he said.

Inwardly, Michelle rejoiced. Outwardly, she leaned toward the camera lens and looked businesslike. "I'll get busy, then."

Davout looked grateful. "You'll be able to get on it right away?"

"Certainly. What I need you to do is send me pictures of Terzian, from as many different angles as possible, especially from around that period of time."

"I have them ready."

"Send away."

An eyeblink later, the pictures were in Michelle's deck. <Thanks> she flashed. "I'll let you know as soon as I find anything."

At university, Michelle had discovered that she was very good at research, and it had become a profitable sideline for her. People—usually people connected with academe in one way or another—hired her to do the duller bits of their own jobs, finding documents or references, or, in this case, three missing weeks out of a person's life. It was almost always work they could do themselves, but Michelle was simply better at research than most people, and she was considered worth the extra expense. Michelle herself usually enjoyed the work—it gave her interesting sidelights on fields about which she knew little, and provided a welcome break from routine.

Plus, this particular job required not so much a researcher as an artist, and Michelle was very good at this particular art.

Michelle looked through the pictures, most scanned from old photographs. Davout had selected well: Terzian's face or profile was clear in every picture. Most of the pictures showed him young, in his twenties, and the ones that showed him older were of high quality, or showed parts of the body that would be crucial to the biometric scan, like his hands or his ears.

The mermaid paused for a moment to look at one of the old photos: Terzian smiling with his arm around a tall, long-legged woman with a wide mouth and dark, bobbed hair, presumably the wife who had died.

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Behind them was a Louis Quinze table with a blaze of gladiolas in a cloisonné vase, and, above the table, a large portrait of a stately-looking horse in a heavy gilded frame. Beneath the table were stowed—temporarily, Michelle assumed—a dozen or so trophies, which to judge from the little golden figures balanced atop them were awarded either for gymnastics or martial arts. The opulent setting seemed a little at odds with the young, informally dressed couple: she wore a flowery tropical shirt tucked into khakis, and Terzian was dressed in a tank top and shorts. There was a sense that the photographer had caught them almost in motion, as if they'd paused for the picture en route from one place to another.

Nice shoulders, Michelle thought. Big hands, well-shaped muscular legs. She hadn't ever thought of Terzian as young, or large, or strong, but he had a genuine, powerful physical presence that came across even in the old, casual photographs. He looked more like a football player than a famous thinker.

Michelle called up her character-recognition software and fed in all the pictures, then checked the software's work, something she was reasonably certain her employer would never have done if he'd been doing this job himself. Most people using this kind of canned software didn't realize how the program could be fooled, particularly when used with old media, scanned film prints heavy with grain and primitive digital images scanned by machines that simply weren't very intelligent. In the end, Michelle and the software between them managed an excellent job of mapping Terzian's body and calibrating its precise ratios: the distance between the eyes, the length of nose and curve of lip, the distinct shape of the ears, the length of limb and trunk. Other men might share some of these biometric ratios, but none would share them all.

The mermaid downloaded the data into her specialized research spiders, and sent them forth into the electronic world.

A staggering amount of the trivial past existed there, and nowhere else. People had uploaded pictures, diaries, commentary, and video; they'd digitized old home movies, complete with the garish, deteriorating colors of the old film stock; they'd scanned in family trees, postcards, wedding lists, drawings, political screeds, and images of handwritten letters. Long, dull hours of security video. Whatever had meant something to someone, at some time, had been turned into electrons and made available to the universe at large.

A surprising amount of this stuff had survived the Lightspeed War—none of it had seemed worth targeting, or, if trashed, had been reloaded from backups.

What all this meant was that Terzian was somewhere in there. Wherever Terzian had gone in his weeks of absence—Paris, Dalmatia, or Thule—there would have been someone with a camera. In stills of children eating ice cream in front of Notre Dame, or moving through the video of buskers playing saxophone on the Pont des Artistes, there would be a figure in the background, and that figure would be Terzian. Terzian might be found lying on a beach in Corfu, reflected in a bar mirror in Gdynia, or negotiating with a prostitute in Hamburg's St. Pauli district—Michelle had found targets in exactly those places during the course of her other searches.

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Michelle sent her software forth to find Terzian, then lifted her arms above her head and stretched—stretched fiercely, thrusting out her bare feet and curling the toes, the muscles trembling with tension, her mouth yawned in a silent shriek.

Then she leaned over her deck again, and called up the message from Darton, the message she'd saved till last.

"I don't understand," he said. "Why won't you talk to me? I love you!"

His brown eyes were a little wild.

"Don't you understand?" he cried. "I'm not dead! *I'm not really dead!*"

Michelle hovered three or four meters below the surface of Zigzag Lake, gazing upward at the inverted bowl of the heavens, the brilliant blue of the Pacific sky surrounded by the dark, shadowy towers of mangrove. Something caught her eye, something black and falling, like a bullet: and then there was a splash and a boil of bubbles, and the daggerlike bill of a collared kingfisher speared a blue-eyed apogonid that had been hovering over a bright red coral head. The kingfisher flashed its pale underside as it stroked to the surface, its wings doing efficient double duty as fins, and then there was a flurry of wings and feet and bubbles and the kingfisher was airborne again.

Michelle floated up and over the barrel-shaped coral head, then over a pair of giant clams, each over a meter long. The clams drew shut as Michelle slid across them, withdrawing the huge siphons as thick as her wrist. The fleshy lips that overhung the scalloped edges of the shells were a riot of colors: purples, blues, greens, and reds interwoven in a eye-boggling pattern.

Carefully drawing in her gills so their surfaces wouldn't be inflamed by coral stings, she kicked up her feet and dove beneath the mangrove roots into the narrow tunnel that connected Zigzag Lake with the sea.

Of the three hundred or so Rock Islands, seventy or thereabouts had marine lakes. The islands were made of coral limestone and porous to one degree or another: some lakes were connected to the ocean through tunnels and caves, and others through seepage. Many of the lakes contained forms of life unique in all the world, evolved distinctly from their remote ancestors: even now, after all this time, new species were being described.

During the months Michelle had spent in the islands, she thought she'd discovered two undescribed species: a variation on the *Entacmaea medusivora* white anemone that was patterned strangely with scarlet and a cobalt-blue; and a nudibranch, deep violet with yellow polka dots, that had undulated past her one night on the reef, flapping like a tea towel in a strong wind as a seven-knot tidal current tore it along. The nudi and samples of the anemone had been sent to the appropriate authorities, and perhaps in time Michelle would be immortalized by having a Latinate version of her name appended to the scientific description of the two marine animals.

The tunnel was about fifteen meters long, and had a few narrow twists where Michelle had to pull her wings in close to her sides and maneuver by the merest fluttering of their edges. The tunnel turned up, and bright-

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ened with the sun; the mermaid extended her wings and flew over brilliant pink soft corals toward the light.

Two hours' work, she thought, *plus a hazardous environment. Twenty-two hundred calories, easy.*

The sea was brilliantly lit, unlike the gloomy marine lake surrounded by tall cliffs, mangroves, and shadow, and for a moment Michelle's sun-dazzled eyes failed to see the boat bobbing on the tide. She stopped short, her wings cupping to brake her motion, and then she recognized the boat's distinctive paint job, a bright red meant to imitate the natural oil of the *cheritem* fruit.

Michelle prudently rose to the surface a safe distance away—Torbiong might be fishing, and sometimes he did it with a spear. The old man saw her, and stood to give a wave before Michelle could unblock her trachea and draw air into her lungs to give a hail.

"I brought you supplies," he said.

"Thanks." Michelle said as she wiped a rain of sea water from her face.

Torbiong was over two hundred years old, and Paramount Chief of Koror, the capital forty minutes away by boat. He was small and wiry and black-haired, and had a broad-nosed, strong-chinned, unlined face. He had traveled over the world and off it while young, but returned to Belau as he aged. His duties as chief were mostly ceremonial, but counted for tax purposes; he had money from hotels and restaurants that his ancestors had built and that others managed for him, and he spent most of his time visiting his neighbors, gossiping, and fishing. He had befriended Darton and Michelle when they'd first come to Belau, and helped them in securing the permissions for their researches on the Rock Islands. A few months back, after Darton died, Torbiong had agreed to bring supplies to Michelle in exchange for the occasional fish.

His boat was ten meters long and featured a waterproof canopy amidships made from interwoven pandanas leaves. Over the scarlet faux-*cheritem* paint were zigzags, crosses, and stripes in the brilliant yellow of the ginger plant. The ends of the thwarts were decorated with grotesque carved faces, and dozens of white cowrie shells were glued to the gunwales. Wooden statues of the kingfisher bird sat on the prow and stern.

Thrusting above the pandanas canopy were antennae, flagpoles, deep-sea fishing rods, fish spears, radar, and a satellite uplink. Below the canopy, where Torbiong could command the boat from an elaborately carved throne of breadfruit-tree wood, were the engine and rudder controls, radio, audio, and video sets, a collection of large audio speakers, a depth finder, a satellite navigation relay, and radar. Attached to the uprights that supported the canopy were whistles tuned to make an eerie, discordant wailing noise when the boat was at speed.

Torbiong was fond of discordant wailing noises. As Michelle swam closer, she heard the driving, screeching electronic music that Torbiong loved trickling from the earpieces of his headset—he normally howled it out of speakers, but when sitting still he didn't want to scare the fish. At night, she could hear Torbiong for miles, as he raced over the darkened sea blasted out of his skull on betel-nut juice with his music thundering and the whistles shrieking.

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He removed the headset, releasing a brief audio onslaught before switching off his sound system.

"You're going to make yourself deaf," Michelle said.

Torbiong grinned. "Love that music. Gets the blood moving."

Michelle floated to the boat and put a hand on the gunwale between a pair of cowries.

"I saw that boy of yours on the news," Torbiong said. "He's making you famous."

"I don't want to be famous."

"He doesn't understand why you don't talk to him."

"He's dead," Michelle said.

Torbiong made a spreading gesture with his hands. "That's a matter of opinion."

"Watch your head," said Michelle.

Torbiong ducked as a gust threatened to bring him into contact with a pitcher plant that drooped over the edge of the island's overhang. Torbiong evaded the plant and then stepped to the bow to haul in his mooring line before the boat's canopy got caught beneath the overhang,

Michelle submerged and swam till she reached her banyan tree, then surfaced and called down her rope elevator. By the time Torbiong's boat hissed up to her, she'd folded away her gills and wings and was sitting in the sling, kicking her legs over the water.

Torbiong handed her a bag of supplies: some rice, tea, salt, vegetables, and fruit. For the last several weeks Michelle had experienced a craving for blueberries, which didn't grow here, and Torbiong had included a large package fresh off the shuttle, and a small bottle of cream to go with them. Michelle thanked him.

"Most tourists want corn chips or something," Torbiong said pointedly.

"I'm not a tourist." Michelle said. "I'm sorry I don't have any fish to swap—I've been hunting smaller game." She held out the specimen bag, still dripping sea water.

Torbiong gestured toward the cooler built into the back of his boat. "I got some *chai* and a *chersuuch* today," he said, using the local names for barracuda and mahi mahi.

"Good fishing."

"Trolling." With a shrug. He looked up at her, a quizzical look on his face. "I've got some calls from reporters," he said, and then his betel-stained smile broke out. "I always make sure to send them tourist literature."

"I'm sure they enjoy reading it."

Torbiong's grin widened. "You get lonely, now," he said, "you come visit the family. We'll give you a home-cooked meal."

She smiled. "Thanks."

They said their farewells and Torbiong's boat hissed away on its jets, the whistles building to an eerie, spine-shivering chord. Michelle rose into the trees and stashed her specimens and groceries. With a bowl of blueberries and cream, Michelle crossed the rope walkway to her deck, and checked the progress of her search spiders.

There were pointers to a swarm of articles about the death of Terzian's

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wife, and Michelle wished she'd given her spiders clearer instructions about dates.

The spiders had come up with three pictures. One was a not-very-well focused tourist video from July 10, showing a man standing in front of the Basilica di Santa Croce in Florence. A statue of Dante, also not in focus, gloomed down at him from beneath thick-bellied rain clouds. As the camera panned across him, he stood with his back to the camera, but turned to the right, one leg turned out as he scowled down at the ground—the profile was a little smeared, but the big, broad-shouldered body seemed right. The software reckoned that there was a 78 percent chance that the man was Terzian.

Michelle got busy refining the image, and after a few passes of the software, decided the chances of the figure being Terzian were more on the order of 95 percent.

So maybe Terzian had gone on a Grand Tour of European cultural sites. He didn't look happy in the video, but then the day was rainy and Terzian didn't have an umbrella.

And his wife had died, of course.

Now that Michelle had a date and a place she refined the instructions from her search spiders to seek out images from Florence a week either way from July 3, and then expand the search from there, first all Tuscany, then all Italy.

If Terzian was doing tourist sites, then she surely had him nailed.

The next two hits, from her earlier research spiders, were duds. The software gave a less than 50 percent chance of Terzian's being in Lisbon or Cape Sounion, and refinements of the image reduced the chance to something near zero.

Then the next video popped up, with a time stamp right there in the image—Paris, June 26, 13:41:44 hours, just a day before Terzian bought a bankroll of Euros and vanished.

<Bingo!> Michelle's fingers formed.

The first thing Michelle saw was Terzian walking out of the frame—no doubt this time that it was him. He was looking over his shoulder at a small crowd of people. There was a dark-haired woman huddled on his arm, her face turned away from the camera. Michelle's heart warmed at the thought of the lonely widower Terzian having an affair in the City of Love.

Then she followed Terzian's gaze to see what had so drawn his attention. A dead man stretched out on the pavement, surrounded by hapless bystanders.

And then, as the scene slowly settled into her astonished mind, the video sang at her in the piping voice of Pan.

Terzian looked at his audience as anger raged in his backbrain. A wooden chair creaked, and the sound spurred Terzian to wonder how long the silence had gone on. Even the Slovenian woman who had been drowsing realized that something had changed, and blinked herself to alertness.

"I'm sorry," he said in French. "But my wife just died, and I don't feel like playing this game any more."

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His silent audience watched as he gathered his papers, put them in his case, and left the lecture room, his feet making sharp, murderous sounds on the wooden floor.

Yet up to that point his paper had been going all right. He'd been uncertain about commenting on Baudrillard in Baudrillard's own country, and in Baudrillard's own language, a cheery compare-and-contrast exercise between Baudrillard's "the self does not exist" and Rorty's "I don't care," the stereotypical French and American answers to modern life. There had been seven in his audience, perched on creaking wooden chairs, and none of them had gone to sleep, or walked out, or condemned him for his audacity.

Yet, as he looked at his audience and read on, Terzian had felt the anger growing, spawned by the sensation of his own uselessness. Here he was, in the City of Light, its every cobblestone a monument to European civilization, and he was in a dreary lecture hall on the Left Bank, reading to his audience of seven from a paper that was nothing more than a footnote, and a footnote to a footnote at that. To come to the land of *cogito ergo sum* and to answer, *I don't care?*

I came to Paris for this? he thought. *To read this* drivel? *I* paid *for the privilege of doing* this?

I do *care,* he thought as his feet turned toward the Seine. *Desiderio, ergo sum,* if he had his Latin right. I am in pain, and therefore I *do* exist.

He ended in a Norman restaurant on the Ile de la Cité, with lunch as his excuse and the thought of getting hopelessly drunk not far from his thoughts. He had absolutely nothing to do until August, after which he would return to the States and collect his belongings from the servants' quarters of the house on Esplanade, and then he would go about looking for a job.

He wasn't certain whether he would be more depressed by finding a job or by not finding one.

You are alive, he told himself. *You are alive and in Paris with the whole summer ahead of you, and you're eating the cuisine of Normandy in the Place Dauphine. And if that isn't a command to be joyful, what is?*

It was then that the Peruvian band began to play. Terzian looked up from his plate in weary surprise.

When Terzian had been a child his parents—both university professors—had first taken him to Europe, and he'd seen then that every European city had its own Peruvian or Bolivian street band, Indians in black bowler hats and colorful blankets crouched in some public place, gazing with impassive brown eyes from over their guitars and reed flutes.

Now, a couple of decades later, the musicians were still here, though they'd exchanged the blankets and bowler hats for European styles, and their presentation had grown more slick. Now they had amps, and cassettes and CDs for sale. Now they had congregated in the triangular Place Dauphine, overshadowed by the neo-classical mass of the Palais de Justice, and commenced a Latin-flavored medley of old Abba songs.

Maybe, after Terzian finished his veal in calvados sauce, he'd go up to the band and kick in their guitars.

The breeze flapped the canvas overhead. Terzian looked at his empty

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plate. The food had been excellent, but he could barely remember tasting it.

Anger still roiled beneath his thoughts. And—for God's *sake*—was that band now playing *Oasis?* Those chords were beginning to sound suspiciously like "Wonderwall." "Wonderwall" on Spanish guitars, reed flutes, and a mandolin!

Terzian had nearly decided to call for a bottle of cognac and stay here all afternoon, but not with that noise in the park. He put some euros on the table, anchoring the bills with a saucer against the fresh spring breeze that rattled the green canvas canopy over his head. He was stepping through the restaurant's little wrought-iron gate to the sidewalk when the scuffle caught his attention.

The man falling into the street, his face pinched with pain. The hands of the three men on either side who were, seemingly, unable to keep their friend erect.

Idiots, Terzian thought, fury blazing in him.

There was a sudden shrill of tires, of an auto horn.

Papers streamed in the wind as they spilled from a briefcase.

And over it all came the amped sound of pan pipes from the Peruvian band. *Wonderwall.*

Terzian watched in exasperated surprise as the three men sprang after the papers. He took a step toward the fallen man—*someone* had to take charge here. The fallen man's hair had spilled in a shock over his forehead and he'd curled on his side, his face still screwed up in pain.

The pan pipes played on, one distinct hollow shriek after another.

Terzian stopped with one foot still on the sidewalk and looked around at faces that all registered the same sense of shock. Was there a doctor here? he wondered. A *French* doctor? All his French seemed to have just drained from his head. Even such simple questions as *Are you all right?* and *How are you feeling?* seemed beyond him now. The first aid course he'd taken in his Kenpo school was *ages* ago.

Unnaturally pale, the fallen man's face relaxed. The wind floated his shock of thinning dark hair over his face. In the park, Terzian saw a man in a baseball cap panning a video camera, and his anger suddenly blazed up again at the fatuous uselessness of the tourist, the uselessness that mirrored his own.

Suddenly there was a crowd around the casualty, people coming out of stopped cars, off the sidewalk. Down the street, Terzian saw the distinctive flat-topped kepis of a pair of policemen bobbing toward him from the direction of the Palais de Justice, and felt a surge of relief. Someone more capable than this lot would deal with this now.

He began, hesitantly, to step away. And then his arm was seized by a pair of hands and he looked in surprise at the woman who had just huddled her face into his shoulder, cinnamon-dark skin and eyes invisible beneath wraparound shades.

"Please," she said in English a bit too musical to be American. "Take me out of here."

The sound of the reed pipes followed them as they made their escape.

* * *

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He walked her past the statue of the Vert Galant himself, good old lecherous Henri IV, and onto the Pont Neuf. To the left, across the Seine, the Louvre glowed in mellow colors beyond a screen of plane trees.

Traffic roared by, a stampede of steel unleashed by a green light. Unfocused anger blazed in his mind. He didn't want this woman attached to him, and he suspected she was running some kind of scam. The gym bag she wore on a strap over one shoulder kept banging him on the ass. Surreptitiously, he slid his hand into his right front trouser pocket to make sure his money was still there.

Wonderwall, he thought. Christ.

He supposed he should offer some kind of civilized comment, just in case the woman was genuinely distressed.

"I suppose he'll be all right," he said, half-barking the words in his annoyance and anger.

The woman's face was still half-buried in his shoulder. "He's dead," she murmured into his jacket. "Couldn't you tell?"

For Terzian, death had never occurred under the sky, but shut away, in hospice rooms with crisp sheets and warm colors and the scent of disinfectant. In an explosion of tumors and wasting limbs and endless pain masked only in part by morphia.

He thought of the man's pale face, the sudden relaxation.

Yes, he thought, death came with a sigh.

Reflex kept him talking. "The police were coming," he said. "They'll—they'll call an ambulance or something."

"I only hope they catch the bastards who did it," she said.

Terzian's heart gave a jolt as he recalled the three men who let the victim fall, and then dashed through the square for his papers. For some reason, all he could remember about them were their black-laced boots, with thick soles.

"Who were they?" he asked blankly.

The woman's shades slid down her nose, and Terzian saw startling green eyes narrowed to murderous slits. "I suppose they think of themselves as cops," she said.

Terzian parked his companion in a café near Les Halles, within sight of the dome of the Bourse. She insisted on sitting indoors, not on the sidewalk, and on facing the front door so that she could scan whoever came in. She put her gym bag, with its white Nike swoosh, on the floor between the table legs and the wall, but Terzian noticed she kept its shoulder strap in her lap, as if she might have to bolt at any moment.

Terzian kept his wedding ring within her sight. He wanted her to see it; it might make things simpler.

Her hands were trembling. Terzian ordered coffee for them both. "No," she said suddenly. "I want ice cream."

Terzian studied her as she turned to the waiter and ordered in French. She was around his own age, twenty-nine. There was no question that she was a mixture of races, but *which* races? The flat nose could be African or Asian or Polynesian, and Polynesia was again confirmed by the black, thick brows. Her smooth brown complexion could be from any-

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where but Europe, but her pale green eyes were nothing but European. Her broad, sensitive mouth suggested Nubia. The black ringlets yanked into a knot behind her head could be African or East Indian, or, for that matter, French. The result was too striking to be beautiful—and also too striking, Terzian thought, to belong to a successful criminal. Those looks could be too easily identified.

The waiter left. She turned her wide eyes toward Terzian, and seemed faintly surprised that he was still there.

"My name's Jonathan," he said.

"I'm," hesitating, "Stephanie."

"Really?" Terzian let his skepticism show.

"Yes." She nodded, reaching in a pocket for cigarettes. "Why would I lie? It doesn't matter if you know my real name or not."

"Then you'd better give me the whole thing."

She held her cigarette upward, at an angle, and enunciated clearly. "Stephanie América Pais e Silva."

"America?"

Striking a match. "It's a perfectly ordinary Portuguese name."

He looked at her. "But you're not Portuguese."

"I carry a Portuguese passport."

Terzian bit back the comment, *I'm sure you do.*

Instead he said, "Did you know the man who was killed?"

Stephanie nodded. The drags she took off her cigarette did not ease the tremor in her hands.

"Did you know him well?"

"Not very." She dragged in smoke again, then let the smoke out as she spoke.

"He was a colleague. A biochemist."

Surprise silenced Terzian. Stephanie tipped ash into the Cinzano ashtray, but her nervousness made her miss, and the little tube of ash fell on the tablecloth.

"Shit," she said, and swept the ash to the floor with a nervous movement of her fingers.

"Are you a biochemist, too?" Terzian asked.

"I'm a nurse." She looked at him with her pale eyes. "I work for Santa Croce—it's a—"

"A relief agency." A Catholic one, he remembered. The name meant *Holy Cross.*

She nodded.

"Shouldn't you go to the police?" he asked. And then his skepticism returned. "Oh, that's right—it was the police who did the killing."

"Not the *French* police." She leaned across the table toward him. "This was a different sort of police, the kind who think that killing someone and making an arrest are the same thing. You look at the television news tonight. They'll report the death, but there won't be any arrests. Or any suspects." Her face darkened, and she leaned back in her chair to consider a new thought. "Unless they somehow manage to blame it on me."

Terzian remembered papers flying in the spring wind, men in heavy boots sprinting after. The pinched, pale face of the victim.

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"Who, then?"

She gave him a bleak look through a curl of cigarette smoke. "Have you ever heard of Transnistria?"

Terzian hesitated, then decided "No" was the most sensible answer.

"The murderers are Transnistrian." A ragged smile drew itself across Stephanie's face. "Their intellectual property police. They killed Adrian over a copyright."

At that point, the waiter brought Terzian's coffee, along with Stephanie's order. Hers was colossal, a huge glass goblet filled with pastel-colored ice creams and fruit syrups in bright primary colors, topped by a mountain of cream and a toy pinwheel on a candy-striped stick. Stephanie looked at the creation in shock, her eyes wide.

"I love ice cream," she choked, and then her eyes brimmed with tears and she began to cry.

Stephanie wept for a while, across the table, and, between sobs, choked down heaping spoonfuls of ice cream, eating in great gulps and swiping at her lips and tear-stained cheeks with a paper napkin.

The waiter stood quietly in the corner, but from his glare and the set of his jaw it was clear that he blamed Terzian for making the lovely woman cry.

Terzian felt his body surge with the impulse to aid her, but he didn't know what to do. Move around the table and put an arm around her? Take her hand? Call someone to take her off his hands?

The latter, for preference.

He settled for handing her a clean napkin when her own grew sodden.

His skepticism had not survived the mention of the Transnistrian copyright police. This was far too bizarre to be a con—a scam was based on basic human desire, greed, or lust, not something as abstract as intellectual property. Unless there was a gang who made a point of targeting academics from the States, luring them with a tantalizing hook about a copyright worth murdering for. . . .

Eventually, the storm subsided. Stephanie pushed the half-consumed ice cream away, and reached for another cigarette.

He tapped his wedding ring on the table top, something he did when thinking. "Shouldn't you contact the local police?" he asked. "You know something about this . . . death." For some reason he was reluctant to use the word *murder.* It was as if using the word would make something true, not the killing itself but his relationship to the killing . . . to call it murder would grant it some kind of power over him.

She shook her head. "I've got to get out of France before those guys find me. Out of Europe, if I can, but that would be hard. My passport's in my hotel room, and they're probably watching it."

"Because of this copyright."

Her mouth twitched in a half-smile. "That's right."

"It's not a literary copyright, I take it."

She shook her head, the half-smile still on her face.

"Your friend was a biologist." He felt a hum in his nerves, a certainty that he already knew the answer to the next question.

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"Is it a weapon?" he asked.

She wasn't surprised by the question. "No," she said. "No, just the opposite." She took a drag on her cigarette and sighed the smoke out. "It's an antidote. An antidote to human folly."

"Listen," Stephanie said. "Just because the Soviet Union fell doesn't mean that *Sovietism* fell with it. Sovietism is still there—the only difference is that its moral justification is gone, and what's left is violence and extortion disguised as law enforcement and taxation. The old empire breaks up, and in the West you think it's great, but more countries just meant more palms to be greased—all throughout the former Soviet empire you've got more 'inspectors' and 'tax collectors,' more 'customs agents' and 'security directorates' than there ever were under the Russians. All these people do is prey off their own populations, because no one else will do business with them unless they've got oil or some other resource that people want."

"Trashcanistans," Terzian said. It was a word he'd heard used of his own ancestral homeland, the former Soviet Republic of Armenia, whose looted economy and paranoid, murderous, despotic Russian puppet regime was supported only by millions of dollars sent to the country by Americans of Armenian descent, who thought that propping up the gang of thugs in power somehow translated into freedom for the fatherland.

Stephanie nodded. "And the worst Trashcanistan of all is Transnistria."

She and Terzian had left the café and taken a taxi back to the Left Bank and Terzian's hotel. He had turned the television to a local station, but muted the sound until the news came on. Until then the station showed a rerun of an American cop show, stolid, businesslike detectives underplaying their latest sordid confrontation with tragedy.

The hotel room hadn't been built for the queen-sized bed it now held, and there was an eighteen-inch clearance around the bed and no room for chairs. Terzian, not wanting Stephanie to think he wanted to get her in the sack, perched uncertainly on a corner of the bed, while Stephanie disposed herself more comfortably, sitting cross-legged in its center.

"Moldova was a Soviet republic put together by Stalin," she said. "It was made up of Bessarabia, which was a part of Romania that Stalin chewed off at the beginning of the Second World War, plus a strip of industrial land on the far side of the Dniester. When the Soviet Union went down, Moldova became 'independent'—" Terzian could hear the quotes in her voice. "But independence had nothing to do with the Moldovan *people*, it was just Romanian-speaking Soviet elites going off on their own account once their own superiors were no longer there to restrain them. And Moldova soon split—first the Turkish Christians . . ."

"Wait a second," Terzian said. "There are *Christian Turks?*"

The idea of Christian Turks was not a part of his Armenian-American worldview.

Stephanie nodded. "Orthodox Christian Turks, yes. They're called Gagauz, and they now have their own autonomous republic of Gagauzia within Moldova."

Stephanie reached into her pocket for a cigarette and her lighter.

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"Uh," Terzian said. "Would you mind smoking out the window?"

Stephanie made a face. "Americans," she said, but she moved to the window and opened it, letting in a blast of cool spring air. She perched on the windowsill, sheltered her cigarette from the wind, and lit up.

"Where was I?" she asked.

"Turkish Christians."

"Right." Blowing smoke into the teeth of the gale. "Gagauzia was only the start—after that, a Russian general allied with a bunch of crooks and KGB types created a rebellion in the bit of Moldova that was on the far side of the Dniester—another collection of Soviet elites, representing no one but themselves. Once the Russian-speaking rebels rose against their Romanian-speaking oppressors, the Soviet Fourteenth Army stepped in as 'peacekeepers,' complete with blue helmets, and created a twenty-mile-wide state recognized by no other government. And that meant more military, more border guards, more administrators, more taxes to charge, and customs duties, and uniformed ex-Soviets whose palms needed greasing. And over a hundred thousand refugees who could be put in camps while the administration stole their supplies and rations. . . .

"But—" She jabbed the cigarette like a pointer. "Transnistria had a problem. No other nation recognized their existence, and they were tiny and had no natural resources, barring the underage girls they enslaved by the thousands to export for prostitution. The rest of the population was leaving as fast as they could, restrained only slightly by the fact that they carried passports no other state recognized, and that meant there were fewer people whose productivity the elite could steal to support their predatory post-Soviet lifestyles. All they had was a lot of obsolete Soviet heavy industry geared to produce stuff no one wanted.

"But they still had the *infrastructure.* They had power plants—running off Russian oil they couldn't afford to buy—and they had a transportation system. So the outlaw regime set up to attract other outlaws who needed industrial capacity—the idea was that they'd attract entrepreneurs who were excused paying most of the local 'taxes' in exchange for making one big payoff to the higher echelon."

"Weapons?" Terzian asked.

"Weapons, sure," Stephanie nodded. "Mostly they're producing cheap knockoffs of other people's guns, but the guns are up to the size of howitzers. They tried banking and data havens, but the authorities couldn't restrain themselves from ripping those off—banks and data run on trust and control of information, and when the regulators are greedy, short-sighted crooks, you don't get either one. So what they settled on was, well, *biotech.* They've got companies creating cheap generic pharmaceuticals that evade Western patents. . . ." Her look darkened. "Not that I've got a problem with *that,* not when I've seen thousands dying of diseases they couldn't afford to cure. And they've also got other companies who are ripping off Western genetic research to develop their own products. And as long as they make their payoffs to the elite, these companies remain *completely unregulated.* Nobody, not even the government, knows what they're doing in those factories, and the government gives them security free of charge."

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Terzian imagined gene-splicing going on in a rusting Soviet factory, rows and rows of mutant plants with untested, unregulated genetics, all set to be released on an unsuspecting world. Transgenic elements drifting down the Dniester to the Black Sea, growing quietly in its saline environment. . . .

"The news," Stephanie reminded, and pointed at the television.

Terzian reached for the control and hit the mute button, just as the throbbing, anxious music that announced the news began to fade.

The murder on the Ile de la Cité was the second item on the broadcast. The victim was described as a "foreign national" who had been fatally stabbed, and no arrests had been made. The motive for the killing was unknown.

Terzian changed the channel in time to catch the same item on another channel. The story was unchanged.

"I told you," Stephanie said. "No suspects. No motive."

"You could tell them."

She made a negative motion with her cigarette. "I couldn't tell them who did it, or how to find them. All I could do is put myself under suspicion."

Terzian turned off the TV. "So what happened exactly? Your friend stole from these people?"

Stephanie swiped her forehead with the back of her wrist. "He stole something that was of no value to them. It's only valuable to poor people, who can't afford to pay. And—" She turned to the window and spun her cigarette into the street below. "I'll take it out of here as soon as I can," she said. "I've got to try to contact some people." She closed the window, shutting out the spring breeze. "I wish I had my passport. That would change everything."

I saw a murder this afternoon, Terzian thought. He closed his eyes and saw the man falling, the white face so completely absorbed in the reality of its own agony.

He was so fucking sick of death.

He opened his eyes. "I can get your passport back," he said.

Anger kept him moving until he saw the killers, across the street from Stephanie's hotel, sitting at an outdoor table in a café-bar. Terzian recognized them immediately—he didn't need to look at the heavy shoes, or the broad faces with their disciplined military mustaches—one glance at the crowd at the café showed the only two in the place who weren't French. That was probably how Stephanie knew to speak to him in English, he just didn't dress or carry himself like a Frenchman, for all that he'd worn an anonymous coat and tie. He tore his gaze away before they saw him gaping at them.

Anger turned very suddenly to fear, and as he continued his stride toward the hotel he told himself that they wouldn't recognize him from the Norman restaurant, that he'd changed into blue jeans and sneakers and a windbreaker, and carried a soft-sided suitcase. Still he felt a gunsight on the back of his neck, and he was so nervous that he nearly ran headfirst into the glass lobby door.

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Terzian paid for a room with his credit card, took the key from the Vietnamese clerk, and walked up the narrow stair to what the French called the second floor, but what he would have called the third. No one lurked in the stairwell, and he wondered where the third assassin had gone. Looking for Stephanie somewhere else, probably, an airport or train station.

In his room Terzian put his suitcase on the bed—it held only a few token items, plus his shaving kit—and then he took Stephanie's key from his pocket and held it in his hand. The key was simple, attached to a weighted doorknob-shaped ceramic plug.

The jolt of fear and surprise that had so staggered him on first sighting the two men began to shift again into rage.

They were drinking *beer,* there had been half-empty mugs on the table in front of them, and a pair of empties as well.

Drinking on duty. Doing surveillance while drunk.

Bastards. Trashcanians. They could kill someone simply through drunkenness.

Perhaps they already had.

He was angry when he left his room and took the stairs to the floor below. No foes kept watch in the hall. He opened Stephanie's room and then closed the door behind him.

He didn't turn on the light. The sun was surprisingly high in the sky for the hour: he had noticed that the sun seemed to set later here than it did at home. Maybe France was very far to the west for its time zone.

Stephanie didn't have a suitcase, just a kind of nylon duffel, a larger version of the athletic bag she already carried. He took it from the little closet, and enough of Terzian's suspicion remained so that he checked the luggage tag to make certain the name was *Steph. Pais*, and not another.

He opened the duffel, then got her passport and travel documents from the bedside table and tossed them in. He added a jacket and a sweater from the closet, then packed her toothbrush and shaver into her plastic travel bag and put it in the duffel.

The plan was for him to return to his room on the upper floor and stay the night and avoid raising suspicion by leaving a hotel he'd just checked into. In the morning, carrying two bags, he'd check out and rejoin Stephanie in his own hotel, where she had spent the night in his room, and where the air would by now almost certainly reek with her cigarette smoke.

Terzian opened a dresser drawer and scooped out a double handful of Stephanie's T-shirts, underwear, and stockings, and then he remembered that the last time he'd done this was when he cleaned Claire's belongings out of the Esplanade house.

Shit. Fuck. He gazed down at the clothing between his hands and let the fury rage like a tempest in his skull.

And then, in the angry silence, he heard a creak in the corridor, and then a stumbling thud.

Thick rubber military soles, he thought. With drunk baboons in them.

Instinct shrieked at him not to be trapped in this room, this dead-end where he could be trapped and killed. He dropped Stephanie's clothes

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back into the drawer and stepped to the bed and picked up the duffel in one hand. Another step took him to the door, which he opened with one hand while using the other to fling the duffel into the surprised face of the drunken murderer on the other side.

Terzian hadn't been at his Kenpo school in six years, not since he'd left Kansas City, but certain reflexes don't go away after they've been drilled into a person thousands of times—certainly not the front kick that hooked upward under the intruder's breastbone and drove him breathless into the corridor wall opposite.

A primitive element of his mind rejoiced in the fact that he was bigger than these guys. He could really knock them around.

The second Trashcanian tried to draw a pistol, but Terzian passed outside the pistol hand and drove the point of an elbow into the man's face. Terzian then grabbed the automatic with both hands, took a further step down the corridor, and spun around, which swung the man around Terzian's hip a full two hundred and seventy degrees and drove him headfirst into the corridor wall. When he'd finished falling and opened his eyes he was staring into the barrel of his own gun.

Red rage gave a fangs-bared roar of animal triumph inside Terzian's skull. Perhaps his tongue echoed it. It was all he could do to stop himself from pulling the trigger.

Get Death working for *him* for a change. Why not?

Except that the first man hadn't realized that his side had just lost. He had drawn a knife—a glittering chromed single-edged thing that may have already killed once today—and now he took a dangerous step toward Terzian.

Terzian pointed the pistol straight at the knife man and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

The intruder stared at the gun as if he'd just realized at just this moment it wasn't his partner who held it.

Terzian pulled the trigger again, and when nothing happened his rage melted into terror and he ran. Behind him he heard the drunken knife man trip over his partner and crash to the floor.

Terzian was at the bottom of the stair before he heard the thick-soled military boots clatter on the risers above him. He dashed through the small lobby—he sensed the Vietnamese night clerk, who was facing away, begin to turn toward him just as he pushed open the glass door and ran into the street.

He kept running. At some point he discovered the gun still in his fist, and he put it in the pocket of his windbreaker.

Some moments later, he realized that he wasn't being pursued. And he remembered that Stephanie's passport was still in her duffel, which he'd thrown at the knife man and hadn't retrieved.

For a moment, rage ran through him, and he thought about taking out the gun and fixing whatever was wrong with it and going back to Stephanie's room and getting the documents one way or another.

But then the anger faded enough for him to see what a foolish course that would be, and he returned to his own hotel.

* * *

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Terzian had given Stephanie his key, so he knocked on his own door before realizing she was very unlikely to open to a random knock. "It's Jonathan," he said. "It didn't work out."

She snatched the door open from the inside. Her face was taut with anxiety. She held pages in her hand, the text of the paper he'd delivered that morning.

"Sorry," he said. "They were there, outside the hotel. I got into your room, but—"

She took his arm and almost yanked him into the room, then shut the door behind him. "Did they follow you?" she demanded.

"No. They didn't chase me. Maybe they thought I'd figure out how to work the gun." He took the pistol out of his pocket and showed it to her. "I can't believe how stupid I was—"

"Where did you get that? Where did you get that?" Her voice was nearly a scream, and she shrank away from him, her eyes wide. Her fist crumpled papers over her heart. To his astonishment, he realized that she was afraid of him, that she thought he was *connected,* somehow, with the killers.

He threw the pistol onto the bed and raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "No really!" he shouted over her cries. "It's not mine! I took it from one of them!"

Stephanie took a deep gasp of air. Her eyes were still wild. "Who the hell are you, then?" she said. "James Bond?"

He gave a disgusted laugh. "James Bond would have known how to shoot."

"I was reading your—your article." She held out the pages toward him. "I was thinking, my God, I was thinking, what have I got this poor guy into. Some professor I was sending to his death." She passed a hand over her forehead. "They probably bugged my room. They would have known right away that someone was in it."

"They were drunk," Terzian said. "Maybe they've been drinking all day. Those assholes really pissed me off."

He sat on the bed and picked up the pistol. It was small and blue steel and surprisingly heavy. In the years since he'd last shot a gun, he had forgotten that purposefulness, the way a firearm was designed for a single, clear function. He found the safety where it had been all along, near his right thumb, and flicked it off and then on again.

"There," he said. "That's what I should have done."

Waves of anger shivered through his limbs at the touch of the adrenaline still pouring into his system. A bitter impulse to laugh again rose in him, and he tried to suppress it.

"I guess I was lucky after all," he said. "It wouldn't have done you any good to have to explain a pair of corpses outside your room." He looked up at Stephanie, who was pacing back and forth in the narrow lane between the bed and the wall, and looking as if she badly needed a cigarette. "I'm sorry about your passport. Where were you going to go, anyway?"

"It doesn't so much matter if *I* go," she said. She gave Terzian a quick, nervous glance. "You can fly it out, right?"

"It?" He stared at her. "What do you mean, it?"

"The biotech." Stephanie stopped her pacing and stared at him with

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those startling green eyes. "Adrian gave it to me. Just before they killed him." Terzian's gaze followed hers to the black bag with the Nike swoosh, the bag that sat at the foot of Terzian's bed.

Terzian's impulse to laugh faded. Unregulated, illegal, stolen biotech, he thought. Right in his own hotel room. Along with a stolen gun and a woman who was probably out of her mind.

Fuck.

The dead man was identified by news files as Adrian Cristea, a citizen of Ukraine and a researcher. He had been stabbed once in the right kidney and bled to death without identifying his assailants. Witnesses reported two or maybe three men leaving the scene immediately after Cristea's death. Michelle set more search spiders to work.

For a moment, she considered calling Davout and letting him know that Terzian had probably been a witness to a murder, but decided to wait until she had some more evidence one way or another.

For the next few hours, she did her real work, analyzing the samples she'd taken from Zigzag Lake's sulphide-tainted deeps. It wasn't very physical, and Michelle figured it was only worth a few hundred calories.

A wind floated through the treetops, bringing the scent of night flowers and swaying Michelle's perch beneath her as she peered into her biochemical reader, and she remembered the gentle pressure of Darton against her back, rocking with her as he looked over her shoulder at her results. Suddenly she could remember, with a near-perfect clarity, the taste of his skin on her tongue.

She rose from her woven seat and paced along the bough. *Damn it,* she thought, *I watched you die.*

Michelle returned to her deck and discovered that her spiders had located the police file on Cristea's death. A translation program handled the antique French without trouble, even producing modern equivalents of forensic jargon. Cristea was of Romanian descent, had been born in the old USSR, and had acquired Ukranian citizenship on the breakup of the Soviet Union. The French files themselves had translations of Cristea's Ukranian travel documents, which included receipts showing that he had paid personal insurance, environmental insurance, and departure taxes from Transnistria, a place of which she'd never heard, as well as similar documents from Moldova, which at least was a province, or country, that sounded familiar.

What kind of places were these, where you had to buy *insurance* at the *border?* And what was environmental insurance anyway?

There were copies of emails between French and Ukranian authorities, in which the Ukranians politely declined any knowledge of their citizen beyond the fact that he *was* a citizen. They had no addresses for him.

Cristea apparently lived in Transnistria, but the authorities there echoed the Ukranians in saying they knew nothing of him.

Cristea's tickets and vouchers showed that he had apparently taken a train to Bucharest, and there he'd got on an airline that took him to Prague, and thence to Paris. He had been in the city less than a day before he was killed. Found in Cristea's hotel room was a curious document

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certifying that Cristea was carrying medical supplies, specifically a vaccine against hepatitis A. Michelle wondered why he would be carrying a hepatitis vaccine from Transnistria to France. France presumably had all the hepatitis vaccine it needed.

No vaccine had turned up. Apparently Cristea had got into the European Community without having his bags searched, as there was no evidence that the documents relating to the alleged vaccine had ever been examined.

The missing "vaccine"—at some point in the police file the skeptical quotation marks had appeared—had convinced the Paris police that Cristea was a murdered drug courier, and at that point they'd lost interest in the case. It was rarely possible to solve a professional killing in the drug underworld.

Michelle's brief investigation seemed to have come to a dead end. That Terzian might have witnessed a murder would rate maybe half a sentence in Professor Davout's biography.

Then she checked what her spiders had brought her in regard to Terzian, and found something that cheered her.

There he was inside the Basilica di Santa Croce, a tourist still photograph taken before the tomb of Machiavelli. He was only slightly turned away from the camera and the face was unmistakable. Though there was no date on the photograph, only the year, though he wore the same clothes he wore in the video taken outside the church, and the photo caught him in the act of speaking to a companion. She was a tall woman with deep brown skin, but she was turned away from the camera, and a wide-brimmed sun hat made her features indistinguishable.

Humming happily, Michelle deployed her software to determine whether this was the same woman who had been on Terzian's arm on the Place Dauphine. Without facial features or other critical measurements to compare, the software was uncertain, but the proportion of limb and thorax was right, and the software gave an estimate of 41 percent, which Michelle took to be encouraging.

Another still image of Terzian appeared in an undated photograph taken at a festival in southern France. He wore dark glasses, and he'd grown heavily tanned; he carried a glass of wine in either hand, but the person to whom he was bringing the second glass was out of the frame. Michelle set her software to locating the identity of the church seen in the background, a task the two distinctive belltowers would make easy. She was lucky and got a hit right away: the church was the Eglise St-Michel in Salon-de-Provence, which meant Terzian had attended the Fête des Aires de la Dine in June. Michelle set more search spiders to seeking out photo and video from the festivals. She had no doubt that she'd find Terzian there, and perhaps again his companion.

Michelle retired happily to her hammock. The search was going well. Terzian had met a woman in Paris and traveled with her for weeks. The evidence wasn't quite there yet, but Michelle would drag it out of history somehow.

Romance. The lonely mermaid was in favor of romance, the kind where you ran away to faraway places to be more intently one with the person you adored.

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It was what she herself had done, before everything had gone so wrong, and Michelle had had to take steps to re-establish the moral balance of her universe.

Terzian paid for a room for Stephanie for the night, not so much because he was gallant as because he needed to be alone to think. "There's a breakfast buffet downstairs in the morning," he said. "They have hard-boiled eggs and croissants and Nutella. It's a very un-French thing to do. I recommend it."

He wondered if he would ever see her again. She might just vanish, particularly if she read his thoughts, because another reason for wanting privacy was so that he could call the police and bring an end to this insane situation.

He never quite assembled the motivation to make the call. Perhaps Rorty's *I don't care* had rubbed off on him. And he never got a chance to taste the buffet, either. Stephanie banged on his door very early, and he dragged on his jeans and opened the door. She entered, furiously smoking from her new cigarette pack, the athletic bag over her shoulder.

"How did you pay for the room at my hotel?" she asked.

"Credit card," he said, and in the stunned, accusing silence that followed he saw his James Bond fantasies sink slowly beneath the slack, oily surface of a dismal lake.

Because credit cards leave trails. The Transnistrians would have checked the hotel registry, and the credit card impression taken by the hotel, and now they knew who *he* was. And it wouldn't be long before they'd trace him at this hotel.

"Shit, I should have warned you to pay cash." Stephanie stalked to the window and peered out cautiously. "They could be out there right now."

Terzian felt a sudden compulsion to have the gun in his hand. He took it from the bedside table and stood there, feeling stupid and cold and shirtless.

"How much money do you have?" Terzian asked.

"Couple of hundred."

"I have less."

"You should max out your credit card and just carry Euros. Use your card now before they cancel it."

"Cancel it? How could they cancel it?"

She gave him a tight-lipped, impatient look. "Jonathan. They may be assholes, but they're still a *government*."

They took a cab to the American Express near the Opéra and Terzian got ten thousand Euros in cash from some people who were extremely skeptical about the validity of his documents, but who had, in the end, to admit that all was technically correct. Then Stephanie got a cell phone under the name A. Silva, with a bunch of prepaid hours on it, and within a couple of hours they were on the TGV, speeding south to Nice at nearly two hundred seventy kilometers per hour, all with a strange absence of sound and vibration that made the French countryside speeding past seem like a strangely unconvincing special effect.

Terzian had put them in first class and he and Stephanie were alone in

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a group of four seats. Stephanie was twitchy because he hadn't bought seats in a smoking section. He sat uncertain, unhappy about all the cash he was carrying and not knowing what to do with it—he'd made two big rolls and zipped them into the pockets of his windbreaker. He carried the pistol in the front pocket of his jeans and its weight and discomfort was a perpetual reminder of this situation that he'd been dragged into, pursued by killers from Trashcanistan and escorting illegal biotechnology.

He kept mentally rehearsing drawing the pistol and shooting it. Over and over, remembering to thumb off the safety this time. Just in case Trashcanian commandos stormed the train.

"Hurled into life," he muttered. "An object lesson right out of Heidegger."

"Beg pardon?"

He looked at her. "Heidegger said we're hurled into life. Just like I've been hurled into—" He flapped his hands uselessly. "Into whatever this is. The situation exists before you even got here, but here you are anyway, and the whole business is something you inherit and have to live with." He felt his lips draw back in a snarl. "He also said that a fundamental feature of existence is anxiety in the face of death, which would also seem to apply to our situation. And his answer to all of this was to make existence, *dasein* if you want to get technical, an authentic project." He looked at her. "So what's your authentic project, then? And how authentic is it?"

Her brow furrowed. "What?"

Terzian couldn't stop, not that he wanted to. It was just Stephanie's hard luck that he couldn't shoot anybody right now, or break something up with his fists, and was compelled to lecture instead. "Or," he went on, "to put this in a more accessible context, just pretend we're in a Hitchcock film, okay? This is the scene where Grace Kelly tells Cary Grant exactly who she is and what the maguffin is."

Stephanie's face was frozen into a hostile mask. Whether she understood what he was saying or not, the hostility was clear.

"I don't get it," she said.

"What's in the fucking bag?" he demanded.

She glared at him for a long moment, then spoke, her own anger plain in her voice. "It's the answer to world hunger," she said. "Is that authentic enough for you?"

Stephanie's father was from Angola and her mother from East Timor, both former Portuguese colonies swamped in the decades since independence by war and massacre. Both parents had, with great foresight and intelligence, retained Portuguese passports, and had met in Rome, where they worked for UNESCO, and where Stephanie had grown up with a blend of their genetics and their service ethic.

Stephanie herself had received a degree in administration from the University of Virginia, which accounted for the American lights in her English, then she'd gotten another degree in nursing and went to work for the Catholic relief agency Santa Croce, which sent her to its every war-wrecked, locust-blighted, warlord-ridden, sandstorm-blasted camp in Africa. And a few that *weren't* in Africa.

"Trashcanistan," Terzian said.

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"Moldova," Stephanie said. "For three months, on what was supposed to be my vacation." She shuddered. "I don't mind telling you that it was a frightening thing. I was used to that kind of thing in Africa, but to see it all happening in the developed world . . . warlords, ethnic hatreds, populations being moved at the point of a gun, whole forested districts being turned to deserts because people suddenly need firewood. . . ." Her emerald eyes flashed. "It's all politics, okay? Just like in Africa. Famine and camps are all politics now, and have been since before I was born. A whole population starves, and it's because someone, somewhere, sees a profit in it. It's difficult to just kill an ethnic group you don't like, war is expensive and there are questions at the UN and you may end up at the Hague being tried for war crimes. But if you just wait for a bad harvest and then arrange for the whole population to *starve,* it's different—suddenly your enemies are giving you all their money in return for food, you get aid from the UN instead of grief, and you can award yourself a piece of the relief action and collect bribes from all the relief agencies, and your enemies are rounded up into camps and you can get your armed forces into the country without resistance, make sure your enemies disappear, control everything while some deliveries disappear into government warehouses where the food can be sold to the starving or just sold abroad for a profit. . . ." She shrugged. "That's the way of the world, okay? *But no more!*" She grabbed a fistful of the Nike bag and brandished it at him.

What her time in Moldova had done was to leave Stephanie contacts in the area, some in relief agencies, some in industry and government. So that when news of a useful project came up in Transnistria, she was among the first to know.

"So what is it?" Terzian asked. "Some kind of genetically modified food crop?"

"No." She smiled thinly. "What we have here is a genetically modified *consumer.*"

Those Transnistrian companies had mostly been interested in duplicating pharmaceuticals and transgenic food crops created by other companies, producing them on the cheap and underselling the patent-owners. There were bits and pieces of everything in those labs, DNA human and animal and vegetable. A lot of it had other people's trademarks and patents on it, even the human codes, which US law permitted companies to patent provided they came up with something useful to do with it. And what these semi-outlaw companies were doing was making two things they figured people couldn't do without: drugs and food.

And not just people, since animals need drugs and food, too. Starving, tubercular sheep or pigs aren't worth much at market, so there's as much money in keeping livestock alive as in doing the same for people. So at some point one of the administrators—after a few too many shots of vodka flavored with bison grass—said, "Why should we worry about feeding the animals at all? Why not have them grow their own food, like plants?"

So then began the Green Swine Project, an attempt to make pigs fat and happy by just herding them out into the sun.

"Green swine," Terzian repeated, wondering. "People are getting killed over green swine."

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"Well, no." Stephanie waved the idea away with a twitchy swipe of her hand. "The idea never quite got beyond the vaporware stage, because at that point another question was asked—why swine? Adrian said, Why stop at having animals do photosynthesis—why not *people?*"

"No!" Terzian cried, appalled. "You're going to turn people green?"

Stephanie glared at him. "Something wrong with fat, happy green people?" Her hands banged out a furious rhythm on the armrests of her seat. "I'd have skin to match my eyes. Wouldn't that be attractive?"

"I'd have to see it first," Terzian said, the shock still rolling through his bones.

"Adrian was pretty smart," Stephanie said. "The Transnistrians killed themselves a real genius." She shook her head. "He had it all worked out. He wanted to limit the effect to the skin—no green muscle tissue or skeletons—so he started with a virus that has a tropism for the epidermis—papiloma, that's warts, okay?"

So now we've got green warts, Terzian thought, but he kept his mouth shut.

"So if you're Adrian, what you do is gut out the virus and re-encode to create chlorophyll. Once a person's infected, exposure to sunlight will cause the virus to replicate and chlorophyll to reproduce in the skin."

Terzian gave Stephanie a skeptical look. "That's not going to be very efficient," he said. "Plants get sugars and oxygen from chlorophyll, okay, but they don't need much food, they stand in one place and don't walk around. Add chlorophyll to a person's skin, how many calories do you get each day? Tens? Dozens?"

Stephanie's lips parted in a fierce little smile. "You don't stop with just the chlorophyll. You have to get really efficient electron transport. In a plant that's handled in the chloroplasts, but the human body already has mitochondria to do the same job. You don't have to create these huge support mechanisms for the chlorophyll, you just make use of what's already there. So if you're Adrian, what you do is add trafficking tags to the reaction center proteins so that they'll target the mitochondria, which *already* are loaded with proteins to handle electron transport. The result is that the mitochondria handle transport from the chlorophyll, which is the sort of job they do anyway, and once the virus starts replicating, you can get maybe a thousand calories or more just from standing in the sun. It won't provide full nutrition, but it can keep starvation at bay, and it's not as if starving people have much to do besides stand in the sun anyway."

"It's not going to do much good for Icelanders," Terzian said.

She turned severe. "Icelanders aren't starving. It so happens that most of the people in the world who are starving happen to be in hot places."

Terzian flapped his hands. "Fine. I must be a racist. Sue me."

Stephanie's grin broadened, and she leaned toward Terzian. "I didn't tell you about Adrian's most interesting bit of cleverness. When people start getting normal nutrition, there'll be a competition within the mitochondria between normal metabolism and solar-induced electron transport. So the green virus is just a redundant backup system in case normal nutrition isn't available."

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A triumphant smile crossed Stephanie's face. "Starvation will no longer be a weapon," she said. "Green skin can keep people active and on their feet long enough to get help. It will keep them healthy enough to fend off the epidemics associated with malnutrition. The point is—" She made fists and shook them at the sky. "*The bad guys don't get to use starvation as a weapon anymore!* Famine *ends!* One of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse *dies,* right here, right now, as a result of *what I've got in this bag!*" She picked up the bag and threw it into Terzian's lap, and he jerked on the seat in defensive reflex, knees rising to meet elbows. Her lips skinned back in a snarl, and her tone was mocking.

"I think even that Nazi fuck Heidegger would think my *project* is pretty damn *authentic.* Wouldn't you agree, Herr Doktor Terzian?"

Got you, Michelle thought. Here was a still photo of Terzian at the Fête des Aires de la Dine, with the dark-skinned woman. She had the same wide-brimmed straw hat she'd worn in the Florence church, and had the same black bag over her shoulder, but now Michelle had a clear view of a three-quarter profile, and one hand, with its critical alignments, was clearly visible, holding an ice cream cone.

Night insects whirled around the computer display. Michelle batted them away and got busy mapping. The photo was digital and Michelle could enlarge it.

To her surprise, she discovered that the woman had green eyes. Black women with green irises—or irises of orange or chartreuse or chrome steel—were not unusual in her own time, but she knew that in Terzian's time they were rare. That would make the search much easier.

"Michelle . . ." The voice came just as Michelle sent her new search spiders into the ether. A shiver ran up her spine.

"Michelle . . ." The voice came again.

It was Darton.

Michelle's heart gave a sickening lurch. She closed her console and put it back in the mesh bag, then crossed the rope bridge between the ironwood tree and the banyan. Her knees were weak, and the swaying bridge seemed to take a couple of unexpected pitches. She stepped out onto the banyan's sturdy overhanging limb and gazed out at the water.

"Michelle . . ." To the southwest, in the channel between the mermaid's island and another, she could see a pale light bobbing, the light of a small boat.

"Michelle, where are you?"

The voice died away in the silence and surf. Michelle remembered the spike in her hand, the long, agonized trek up the slope above Jellyfish Lake. Darton pale, panting for breath, dying in her arms.

The lake was one of the wonders of the world, but the steep path over the ridge that fenced the lake from the ocean was challenging even for those who were not dying. When Michelle and Darton—at that time, apes—came up from their boat that afternoon, they didn't climb the steep path, but swung hand-over-hand through the trees overhead, through the hardwood and guava trees, and avoided the poison trees with their bleed-

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ing, allergenic black sap. Even though their trip was less exhausting than if they'd gone over the land route, the two were ready for the cool water by the time they arrived at the lake.

Tens of thousands of years in the past, the water level was higher, and when it receded, the lake was cut off from the Pacific, and with it the *Mastigias* sp. jellyfish, which soon exhausted the supply of small fish that were its food. As the human race did later, the jellies gave up hunting and gathering in exchange for agriculture, and permitted themselves to be farmed by colonies of algae that provided the sugars they needed for life. At night, they'd descend to the bottom of the lake, where they fertilized their algae crops in the anoxic, sulfurous waters; at dawn, the jellies rose to the surface, and during the day, they crossed the lake, following the course of the sun, and allowed the sun's rays to supply the energy necessary for making their daily ration of food.

When Darton and Michelle arrived, there were ten million jellyfish in the lake, from fingertip-sized to jellies the size of a dinner plate, all in one warm throbbing golden-brown mass in the center of the water. The two swam easily on the surface with their long siamang arms, laughing and calling to one another as the jellyfish in their millions caressed them with the most featherlike of touches. The lake was the temperature of their own blood, and it was like a soupy bath, the jellyfish so thick that Michelle felt she could almost walk on the surface. The warm touch wasn't erotic, exactly, but it was sensual in the way that an erotic touch was sensual, a light brush over the skin by the pad of a teasing finger.

Trapped in a lake for thousands of years without suitable prey, the jellyfish had lost most of their ability to sting. Only a small percentage of people were sensitive enough to the toxin to receive a rash or feel a modest burning.

A very few people, though, were more sensitive than that.

Darton and Michelle left at dusk, and, by that time Darton was already gasping for breath. He said he'd overexerted himself, that all he needed was to get back to their base for a snack, but as he swung through the trees on the way up the ridge, he lost his hold on a Palauan apple tree and crashed through a thicket of limbs to sprawl, amid a hail of fruit, on the sharp algae-covered limestone of the ridge.

Michelle swung down from the trees, her heart pounding. Darton was nearly colorless and struggling to breathe. They had no way of calling for help unless Michelle took their boat to Koror or to their base camp on another island. She tried to help Darton walk, taking one of his long arms over her shoulder, supporting him up the steep island trail. He collapsed, finally, at the foot of a poison tree, and Michelle bent over him to shield him from the drops of venomous sap until he died.

Her back aflame with the poison sap, she'd whispered her parting words into Darton's ear. She never knew if he heard.

The coroner said it was a million-to-one chance that Darton had been so deathly allergic, and tried to comfort her with the thought that there was nothing she could have done. Torbiong, who had made the arrangements for Darton and Michelle to come in the first place, had been con-

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soling, had offered to let Michelle stay with his family. Michelle had surprised him by asking permission to move her base camp to another island, and to continue her work alone.

She also had herself transformed into a mermaid, and subsequently, a romantic local legend.

And now Darton was back, bobbing in a boat in the nearby channel and calling her name, shouting into a bullhorn.

"Michelle, I love you." The words floated clear into the night air. Michelle's mouth was dry. Her fingers formed the sign <go away>.

There was a silence, and then Michelle heard the engine start on Darton's boat. He motored past her position, within five hundred meters or so, and continued on to the northern point of the island.

<go away> . . .

"Michelle . . ." Again his voice floated out onto the breeze. It was clear that he didn't know where she was. She was going to have to be careful about showing lights.

<go away> . . .

Michelle waited while Darton called out a half-dozen more times, and then he started his engine and moved on. She wondered if he would search all three hundred islands in the Rock Island group.

No, she knew he was more organized than that.

She'd have to decide what to do when he finally found her.

While a thousand questions chased each other's tails through his mind, Terzian opened the Nike bag and withdrew the small hard plastic case inside, something like a box for fishing tackle. He popped the locks on the case and opened the lid, and he saw glass vials resting in slots cut into dark grey foam. In them was a liquid with a faint golden cast.

"The papiloma," Stephanie said.

Terzian dropped the lid on the case as he cast a guilty look over his shoulder, not wanting anyone to see him with this stuff. If he were arrested under suspicion of being a drug dealer, the wads of cash and the pistol certainly wouldn't help.

"What do you do with the stuff once you get to where you're going?"

"Brush it on the skin. With exposure to solar energy, it replicates as needed."

"Has it been tested?"

"On people? No. Works fine on rhesus monkeys, though."

He tapped his wedding ring on the arm of his seat. "Can it be . . . caught? I mean, it's a virus, can it go from one person to another?"

"Through skin-to-skin contact."

"I'd say that's a yes. Can mothers pass it on to their children?"

"Adrian didn't think it would cross the placental barrier, but he didn't get a chance to test it. If mothers want to infect their children, they'll probably have to do it deliberately." She shrugged. "Whatever the case, my guess is that mothers won't mind green babies, as long as they're green *healthy* babies." She looked down at the little vials in their secure coffins of foam. "We can infect tens of thousands of people with this amount," she said. "And we can make more very easily."

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If mothers want to infect their children . . . Terzian closed the lid of the plastic case and snapped the locks. "You're out of your mind," he said.

Stephanie cocked her head and peered at him, looking as if she'd anticipated his objections and was humoring him. "How so?"

"Where do I start?" Terzian zipped up the bag, then tossed it in Stephanie's lap, pleased to see her defensive reflexes leap in response. "You're planning on unleashing an untested transgenic virus on Africa—on *Africa* of all places, a continent that doesn't exactly have a happy history with pandemics. And it's a virus that's cooked up by a bunch of illegal pharmacists in a non-country with a murderous secret police, facts that don't give me much confidence that this is going to be anything but a disaster."

Stephanie tapped two fingers on her chin as if she were wishing there were a cigarette between them. "I can put your mind to rest on the last issue. The animal study worked. Adrian had a family of bright green rhesus in his lab, till the project was canceled and the rhesus were, ah, liquidated."

"So if the project's so terrific, why'd the company pull the plug?"

"Money." Her lips twisted in anger. "Starving people can't afford to pay for the treatments, so they'd have to practically give the stuff away. Plus they'd get reams of endless bad publicity, which is exactly what outlaw biotech companies in outlaw countries don't want. There are millions of people who go ballistic at the very thought of a genetically engineered *vegetable*—you can imagine how people who can't abide the idea of a transgenic bell pepper would freak at the thought of infecting people with an engineered virus. The company decided it wasn't worth the risk. They closed the project down."

Stephanie looked at the bag in her hands. "But Adrian had been in the camps himself, you see. A displaced person, a refugee from the civil war in Moldova. And he couldn't stand the thought that there was a way to end hunger sitting in his refrigerator in the lab, and that nothing was being done with it. And so . . ." Her hands outlined the case inside the Nike bag. "He called me. He took some vacation time and booked himself into the Henri IV, on the Place Dauphine. And I guess he must have been careless, because . . ."

Tears starred in her eyes, and she fell silent. Terzian, strong in the knowledge that he'd shared quite enough of her troubles by now, stared out the window, at the green landscape that was beginning to take on the brilliant colors of Provence. The Hautes-Alpes floated blue and white-capped in the distant East, and nearby were orchards of almonds and olives with shimmering leaves, and hillsides covered with rows of orderly vines. The Rhone ran silver under the westering sun.

"I'm not going to be your bagman," he said. "I'm not going to contaminate the world with your freaky biotech."

"Then they'll catch you and you'll die," Stephanie said. "And it will be for nothing."

"My experience of death," said Terzian, "is that it's *always* for nothing."

She snorted then, angry. "My experience of death," she mocked, "is that it's too often for *profit*. I want to make mass murder an unprofitable ven-

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ture. I want to crash the market in starvation by *giving away life.*" She gave another snort, amused this time. "It's the ultimate anti-capitalist gesture."

Terzian didn't rise to that. Gestures, he thought, were just that. Gestures didn't change the fundamentals. If some jefe couldn't starve his people to death, he'd just use bullets, or deadly genetic technology he bought from outlaw Transnistrian corporations.

The landscape, all blazing green, raced past at over two hundred kilometers per hour. An attendant came by and sold them each a cup of coffee and a sandwich.

"You should use my phone to call your wife," Stephanie said as she peeled the cellophane from her sandwich. "Let her know that your travel plans have changed."

Apparently she'd noticed Terzian's wedding ring.

"My wife is dead," Terzian said.

She looked at him in surprise. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Brain cancer," he said.

Though it was more complicated than that. Claire had first complained of back pain, and there had been an operation, and the tumor removed from her spine. There had been a couple of weeks of mad joy and relief, and then it had been revealed that the cancer had spread to the brain and that it was inoperable. Chemotherapy had failed. She died six weeks after her first visit to the doctor.

"Do you have any other family?" Stephanie said.

"My parents are dead, too." Auto accident, aneurysm. He didn't mention Claire's uncle Geoff and his partner Luis, who had died of HIV within eight months of each other and left Claire the Victorian house on Esplanade in New Orleans. The house that, a few weeks ago, he had sold for six hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and the furnishings for a further ninety-five thousand, and Uncle Geoff's collection of equestrian art for a further forty-one thousand.

He was disinclined to mention that he had quite a lot of money, enough to float around Europe for years.

Telling Stephanie that might only encourage her.

There was a long silence. Terzian broke it. "I've read spy novels," he said. "And I know that we shouldn't go to the place we've bought tickets for. We shouldn't go anywhere *near* Nice."

She considered this, then said, "We'll get off at Avignon."

They stayed in Provence for nearly two weeks, staying always in unrated hotels, those that didn't even rise to a single star from the Ministry of Tourism, or in *gîtes ruraux,* farmhouses with rooms for rent. Stephanie spent much of her energy trying to call colleagues in Africa on her cell phone and achieved only sporadic success, a frustration that left her in a near-permanent fury. It was never clear just who she was trying to call, or how she thought they were going to get the papiloma off her hands. Terzian wondered how many people were involved in this conspiracy of hers.

They attended some local fêtes, though it was always a struggle to con-

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vince Stephanie it was safe to appear in a crowd. She made a point of disguising herself in big hats and shades and ended up looking like a cartoon spy. Terzian tramped rural lanes or fields or village streets, lost some pounds despite the splendid fresh local cuisine, and gained a suntan. He made a stab at writing several papers on his laptop, and spent time researching them in internet cafés.

He kept thinking he would have enjoyed this trip, if only Claire had been with him.

"What is it you *do,* exactly?" Stephanie asked him once, as he wrote. "I know you teach at university, but . . ."

"I don't teach anymore," Terzian said. "I didn't get my post-doc renewed. The department and I didn't exactly get along."

"Why not?"

Terzian turned away from the stale, stalled ideas on his display. "I'm too interdisciplinary. There's a place on the academic spectrum where history and politics and philosophy come together—it's called 'political theory' usually—but I throw in economics and a layman's understanding of science as well, and it confuses everybody but me. That's why my MA is in American Studies—nobody in my philosophy or political science department had the nerve to deal with me, and nobody knows what American Studies actually *are,* so I was able to hide out there. And my doctorate is in philosophy, but only because I found one rogue professor emeritus who was willing to chair my committee.

"The problem is that if you're hired by a philosophy department, you're supposed to teach Plato or Hume or whoever, and they don't want you confusing everybody by adding Maynard Keynes and Leo Szilard. And if you teach history, you're supposed to confine yourself to acceptable stories about the past and not toss in ideas about perceptual mechanics and Kant's ideas of the noumenon, and of course you court crucifixion from the laity if you mention Foucault or Nietzsche."

Amusement touched Stephanie's lips. "So where do you find a job?"

"France?" he ventured, and they laughed. "In France, 'thinker' is a job description. It's not necessary to have a degree, it's just something you do." He shrugged. "And if that fails, there's always Burger King."

She seemed amused. "Sounds like burgers are in your future."

"Oh, it's not as bad as all that. If I can generate enough interesting, sexy, highly original papers, I might attract attention and a job, in that order."

"And have you done that?"

Terzian looked at his display and sighed. "So far, no."

Stephanie narrowed her eyes and she considered him. "You're not a conventional person. You don't think inside the box, as they say."

"As they say," Terzian repeated.

"Then you should have no objections to radical solutions to world hunger. Particularly ones that don't cost a penny to white liberals throughout the world."

"Hah," Terzian said. "Who says I'm a liberal? I'm an *economist.*"

So Stephanie told him terrible things about Africa. Another famine was brewing across the southern part of the continent. Mozambique was

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plagued with flood *and* drought, a startling combination. The Horn of Africa was worse. According to her friends, Santa Croce had a food shipment stuck in Mogadishu and before letting it pass, the local warlord wanted to renegotiate his bribe. In the meantime, people were starving, dying of malnutrition, infection, and dysentery in camps in the dry highlands of Bale and Sidamo. Their own government in Addis Ababa was worse than the Somali warlord, at this stage permitting no aid at all, bribes or no bribes.

And as for the southern Sudan, it didn't bear thinking about.

"What's *your* solution to this?" she demanded of Terzian. "Or do you have one?"

"Test this stuff, this papiloma," he said, "show me that it works, and I'm with you. But there are too many plagues in Africa as it is."

"Confine the papiloma to labs while thousands die? Hand it to governments who can suppress it because of pressure from religious loons and hysterical NGOs? You call *that* an answer?" And Stephanie went back to working her phone while Terzian walked off in anger for another stalk down country lanes.

Terzian walked toward an old ruined castle that shambled down the slope of a nearby hill. And if Stephanie's plant-people proved viable? he wondered. All bets were off. A world in which humans could become plants was a world in which none of the old rules applied.

Stephanie had said she wanted to crash the market in starvation. But, Terzian thought, that also meant crashing the market in *food.* If people with no money had all the food they needed, that meant *food itself had no value in the marketplace*. Food would be so cheap that there would be no profit in growing or selling it.

And this was all just *one application* of the technology. Terzian tried to keep up with science: he knew about nanoassemblers. Green people was just the first magic bullet in a long volley of scientific musketry that would change every fundamental rule by which humanity had operated since they'd first stood upright. What happened when *every* basic commodity—food, clothing, shelter, maybe even health—was so cheap that it was free? What then had value?

Even *money* wouldn't have value then. Money only had value if it could be exchanged for something of equivalent worth.

He paused in his walk and looked ahead at the ruined castle, the castle that had once provided justice and security and government for the district, and he wondered if he was looking at the future of *all* government. Providing an orderly framework in which commodities could be exchanged was the basic function of the state, that and providing a secure currency. If people didn't need government to furnish that kind of security and if the currency was worthless, the whole future of government itself was in question. Taxes weren't worth the expense of collecting if the money wasn't any good, anyway, and without taxes, government couldn't be paid for.

Terzian paused at the foot of the ruined castle and wondered if he saw the future of the civilized world. Either the castle would be rebuilt by tyrants, or it would fall.

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Michelle heard Darton's bullhorn again the next evening, and she wondered why he was keeping fruit-bat hours. Was it because his calls would travel farther at night?

If he were sleeping in the morning, she thought, that would make it easier. She'd finished analyzing some of her samples, but a principle of science was not to do these things alone: she'd have to travel to Koror to mail her samples to other people, and now she knew to do it in the morning, when Darton would be asleep.

The problem for Michelle was that she was a legend. When the lonely mermaid emerged from the sea and walked to the post office in the little foam booties she wore when walking on pavement, she was noticed. People pointed; children followed her on their boards, people in cars waved. She wondered if she could trust them not to contact Darton as soon as they saw her.

She hoped that Darton wasn't starting to get the islanders on his side.

Michelle and Darton had met on a field trip in Borneo, their obligatory government service after graduation. The other field workers were older, paying their taxes or working on their second or third or fourth or fifth careers, and Michelle knew on sight that Darton was no older than she, that he, too, was a child among all these elders. They were pulled to each other as if drawn by some violent natural force, cataloguing snails and terrapins by day and spending their nights wrapped in each other in their own shell, their turtleback tent. The ancients with whom they shared their days treated them with amused condescension, but then, that was how they treated everything. Darton and Michelle didn't care. In their youth they stood against all creation.

When the trip came to an end, they decided to continue their work together, just a hop across the equator in Belau. Paying their taxes ahead of time. They celebrated by getting new bodies, an exciting experience for Michelle, who had been built by strict parents who wouldn't allow her to have a new body until adulthood, no matter how many of her friends had been transforming from an early age into one newly fashionable shape or another.

Michelle and Darton thought that anthropoid bodies would be suitable for the work, and so they went to the clinic in Delhi and settled themselves on nanobeds and let the little machines turn their bodies, their minds, their memories, their desires and their knowledge and their souls, into long strings of numbers. All of which were fed into their new bodies when they were ready, and reserved as backups to be downloaded as necessary.

Being a siamang was a glorious discovery. They soared through the treetops of their little island, swinging overhand from limb to limb in a frenzy of glory. Michelle took a particular delight in her body hair—she didn't have as much as a real ape, but there was enough on her chest and back to be interesting. They built nests of foliage in trees and lay tangled together, analyzing data or making love or shaving their hair into interesting tribal patterns. Love was far from placid—it was a flame, a fury. An obsession that, against all odds, had been fulfilled, only to build the flame higher.

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The fury still burned in Michelle. But now, after Darton's death, it had a different quality, a quality that had nothing to do with life or youth.

Michelle, spooning up blueberries and cream, riffled through the names and faces her spiders had spat out. There were, now she added them up, a preposterous number of pictures of green-eyed women with dark skin whose pictures were somewhere in the net. Nearly all of them had striking good looks. Many of them were unidentified in the old scans, or identified only by a first name. The highest probability the software offered was 43 percent.

That 43 percent belonged to a Brazilian named Laura Flor, who research swiftly showed was home in Aracaju during the critical period, among other things having a baby. A video of the delivery was available, but Michelle didn't watch it. The way women delivered babies back then was disgusting.

The next most likely female was another Brazilian seen in some tourist photographs taken in Rio. Not even a name given. A further search based on this woman's physiognomy turned up nothing, not until Michelle broadened the search to a different gender, and discovered that the Brazilian was a transvestite. That didn't seem to be Terzian's scene, so she left it alone.

The third was identified only as Stephanie, and posted on a site created by a woman who had done relief work in Africa. Stephanie was shown with a group of other relief workers, posing in front of a tin-roofed, cinderblock building identified as a hospital.

The quality of the photograph wasn't very good, but Michelle mapped the physiognomy anyway, and sent it forth along with the name "Stephanie" to see what might happen.

There was a hit right away, a credit card charge to a Stephanie América Pais e Silva. She had stayed in a hotel in Paris for the three nights before Terzian disappeared.

Michelle's blood surged as the data flashed on her screens. She sent out more spiders and the good news began rolling in.

Stephanie Pais was a dual citizen of Portugal and Angola, and had been educated partly in the States—a quick check showed that her time at university didn't overlap Terzian's. From her graduation, she had worked for a relief agency called Santa Croce.

Then a news item turned up, a sensational one. Stephanie Pais had been spectacularly murdered in Venice on the night of July 19, six days before Terzian had delivered the first version of his Cornucopia Theory.

Two murders. . . .

One in Paris, one in Venice. And one of them of the woman who seemed to be Terzian's lover.

Michelle's body shivered to a sudden gasping spasm, and she realized that in her suspense she'd been holding her breath. Her head swam. When it cleared, she worked out what time it was in Maryland, where Dr. Davout lived, and then told her deck to page him at once.

Davout was unavailable at first, and by the time he returned her call, she had more information about Stephanie Pais. She blurted the story

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out to him while her fingers jabbed at the keyboard of her deck, sending him copies of her corroborating data.

Davout's startled eyes leaped from the data to Michelle and back. "How much of this . . ." he began, then gave up. "How did she die?" he managed.

"The news article says stabbed. I'm looking for the police report."

"Is Terzian mentioned?"

<No> she signed. "The police report will have more details."

"Any idea what this is about? There's no history of Terzian *ever* being connected with violence."

"By tomorrow," Michelle said, "I should be able to tell you. But I thought I should send this to you because you might be able to tie this in with other elements of Terzian's life that I don't know anything about."

Davout's fingers formed a mudra that Michelle didn't recognize—an old one, probably. He shook his head. "I have no idea what's happening here. The only thing I have to suggest is that this is some kind of wild coincidence."

"I don't believe in that kind of coincidence," Michelle said.

Davout smiled. "A good attitude for a researcher," he said. "But experience—well," he waved a hand.

But he loved her, Michelle insisted inwardly. She knew that in her heart. She was the woman he loved after Claire died, and then she was killed and Terzian went on to create the intellectual framework on which the world was now built. He had spent his modest fortune building pilot programs in Africa that demonstrated his vision was a practical one. The whole modern world was a monument to Stephanie.

Everyone was young then, Michelle thought. Even the seventy-year-olds were young compared to the people now. The world must have been *ablaze* with love and passion. But Davout didn't understand that because he was old and had forgotten all about love.

"Michelle . . ." Darton's voice came wafting over the waters.

Bastard. Michelle wasn't about to let him spoil this.

Her fingers formed <gotta go>. "I'll send you everything once it comes in," she said. "I think we've got something amazing here."

She picked up her deck and swung it around so that she could be sure that the light from the display couldn't be seen from the ocean. Her bare back against the rough bark of the ironwood, she began flashing through the data as it arrived.

She couldn't find the police report. Michelle went in search of it and discovered that all police records from that period in Venetian history had been wiped out in the Lightspeed War, leaving her only with what had been reported in the media.

"Where are you? I love you!" Darton's voice came from farther away. He'd narrowed his search, that was clear, but he still wasn't sure exactly where Michelle had built her nest.

Smiling, Michelle closed her deck and slipped it into its pouch. Her spiders would work for her tirelessly till dawn while she dreamed on in her hammock and let Darton's distant calls lull her to sleep.

They shifted their lodgings every few days. Terzian always arranged for

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separate bedrooms. Once, as they sat in the evening shade of a farm terrace and watched the setting sun shimmer on the silver leaves of the olives, Terzian found himself looking at her as she sat in an old cane chair, at the profile cutting sharp against the old limestone of the Vaucluse. The blustering wind brought gusts of lavender from the neighboring farm, a scent that made Terzian want to inhale until his lungs creaked against his ribs.

From a quirk of Stephanie's lips, Terzian was suddenly aware that she knew he was looking at her. He glanced away.

"You haven't tried to sleep with me," she said.

"No," he agreed.

"But you *look*," she said. "And it's clear you're not a eunuch."

"We fight all the time," Terzian pointed out. "Sometimes we can't stand to be in the same room."

Stephanie smiled. "That wouldn't stop most of the men I've known. Or the women, either."

Terzian looked out over the olives, saw them shimmer in the breeze. "I'm still in love with my wife," he said.

There was a moment of silence. "That's well," she said.

And I'm angry at her, too, Terzian thought. Angry at Claire for deserting him. And he was furious at the universe for killing her and for leaving him alive, and he was angry at God even though he didn't believe in God. The Trashcanians had been good for him, because he could let his rage and his hatred settle there, on people who deserved it.

Those poor drunken bastards, he thought. Whatever they'd expected in that hotel corridor, it hadn't been a berserk grieving American who would just as soon have ripped out their throats with his bare hands.

The question was, could he do that again? It had all occurred without his thinking about it, old reflexes taking over, but he couldn't count on that happening a second time. He'd been trying to remember the Kenpo he'd once learned, particularly all the tricks against weapons. He found himself miming combats on his long country hikes, and he wondered if he'd retained any of his ability to take a punch.

He kept the gun with him, so the Trashcanians wouldn't get it if they searched his room when he was away. When he was alone, walking through the almond orchards or on a hillside fragrant with wild thyme, he practiced drawing it, snicking off the safety, and putting pressure on the trigger . . . the first time the trigger pull would be hard, but the first shot would cock the pistol automatically and after that the trigger pull would be light.

He wondered if he should buy more ammunition. But he didn't know how to buy ammunition in France and didn't know if a foreigner could get into trouble that way.

"We're both angry," Stephanie said. He looked at her again, her hand raised to her head to keep the gusts from blowing her long ringlets in her face. "We're angry at death. But love must make it more complicated for you."

Her green eyes searched him. "It's not death you're in love with, is it? Because—"

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Terzian blew up. She had no right to suggest that he was in a secret alliance with death just because he didn't want to turn a bunch of Africans green. It was their worst argument, and this one ended with both of them stalking away through the fields and orchards while the scent of lavender pursued them on the wind.

When Terzian returned to his room, he checked his caches of money, half-hoping that Stephanie had stolen his Euros and run. She hadn't.

He thought of going into her room while she was away, stealing the papiloma, and taking a train north, handing it over to the Pasteur Institute or someplace. But he didn't.

In the morning, during breakfast, Stephanie's cell phone rang, and she answered. He watched while her face turned from curiosity to apprehension to utter terror. Adrenaline sang in his blood as he watched, and he leaned forward, feeling the familiar rage rise in him, just where he wanted it. In haste, she turned off the phone, then looked at him. "That was one of them. He says he knows where we are, and wants to make a deal."

"If they know where we are," Terzian found himself saying coolly, "why aren't they here?"

"We've got to *go*," she insisted.

So they went. Clean out of France and into the Tuscan hills, with Stephanie's cell phone left behind in a trash can at the train station and a new phone purchased in Siena. The Tuscan countryside was not unlike Provence, with vine-covered hillsides, orchards a-shimmer with the silver-green of olive trees, and walled medieval towns perched on crags; but the slim, tall cypress standing like sentries gave the hills a different profile, and there were different types of wine grapes, and many of the vineyards rented rooms where people could stay and sample the local hospitality. Terzian didn't speak the language, and because Spanish was his first foreign language, consistently pronounced words like "villa" and "panzanella" as if they were Spanish. But Stephanie had grown up in Italy and spoke the language not only like a native, but like a native Roman.

Florence was only a few hours away, and Terzian couldn't resist visiting one of the great living monuments to civilization. His parents had taken him to Europe several times as a child, but somehow never made it here.

Terzian and Stephanie spent a day wandering the center of town, on occasion taking shelter from one of the pelting rainstorms that shattered the day. At one point, with thunder booming overhead, they found themselves in the Basilica di Santa Croce.

"Holy Cross," Terzian said, translating. "That's your outfit."

"We have nothing to do with this church," Stephanie said. "We don't even have a collection box here."

"A pity," Terzian said as he looked at the soaked swarms of tourists packed in the aisles. "You'd clean up."

Thunder accompanied the camera strobes that flashed against the huge tomb of Galileo like a vast lighting storm. "Nice of them to forget about that Inquisition thing and bury him in a church," Terzian said.

"I expect they just wanted to keep an eye on him."

It was the power of capital, Terzian knew, that had built this church,

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that had paid for the stained glass and the Giotto frescoes and the tombs and cenotaphs to the great names of Florence: Dante, Michelangelo, Bruni, Alberti, Marconi, Fermi, Rossini, and of course Machiavelli. This structure, with its vaults and chapels and sarcophagi and chanting Franciscans, had been raised by successful bankers, people to whom money was a real, tangible thing, and who had paid for the centuries of labor to build the basilica with caskets of solid, weighty coined silver.

"So what do you think he would make of this?" Terzian asked, nodding at the resting place of Machiavelli, now buried in the city from which he'd been exiled in his lifetime.

Stephanie scowled at the unusually plain sarcophagus with its Latin inscription. "No praise can be high enough," she translated, then turned to him as tourist cameras flashed. "Sounds overrated."

"He was a republican, you know," Terzian said. "You don't get that from just *The Prince.* He wanted Florence to be a republic, defended by citizen soldiers. But when it fell into the hands of a despot, he needed work, and he wrote the manual for despotism. But he looked at despotism a little too clearly, and he didn't get the job." Terzian turned to Stephanie. "He was the founder of modern political theory, and that's what I do. And he based his ideas on the belief that all human beings, at all times, have the same passions." He turned his eyes deliberately to Stephanie's shoulder bag. "That may be about to end, right? You're going to turn people into plants. That should change the passions if anything would."

"Not *plants,*" Stephanie hissed, and glanced left and right at the crowds. "And not *here.*" She began to move down the aisle, in the direction of Michelangelo's ornate tomb, with its draped figures who appeared not in mourning, but as if they were trying to puzzle out a difficult engineering problem.

"What happens in your scheme," Terzian said, following, "is that the market in food crashes. But that's not the *real* problem. The real problem is, what happens to the market in *labor?*"

Tourist cameras flashed. Stephanie turned her head away from the array of Kodaks. She passed out of the basilica and to the portico. The cloudburst had come to an end, but rainwater still drizzled off the structure. They stepped out of the droplets and down the stairs into the piazza.

The piazza was walled on all sides by old palaces, most of which now held restaurants or shops on the ground floor. To the left, one long palazzo was covered with canvas and scaffolding. The sound of pneumatic hammers banged out over the piazza. Terzian waved a hand in the direction of the clatter.

"Just imagine that food is nearly free," he said. "Suppose you and your children can get most of your food from standing in the sunshine. My next question is, *Why in hell would you take a filthy job like standing on a scaffolding and sandblasting some old building?*"

He stuck his hands in his pockets and began walking at Stephanie's side along the piazza. "Down at the bottom of the labor market, there are a lot of people whose labor goes almost entirely for the necessities. Millions of them cross borders illegally in order to send enough money back home to support their children."

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"You think I don't know that?"

"The only reason that there's a market in illegal immigrants is that *there are jobs that well-off people won't do.* Dig ditches. Lay roads. Clean sewers. Restore old buildings. Build *new* buildings. The well-off might serve in the military or police, because there's a certain status involved and an attractive uniform, but we won't guard prisons, no matter how pretty the uniform is. That's strictly a job for the laboring classes, and if the laboring classes are too well-off to labor, who guards the prisons?"

She rounded on him, her lips set in an angry line. "So I'm supposed to be afraid of people having more choice in where they work?"

"No," Terzian said, "you should be afraid of people having *no choice at all*. What happens when markets collapse is *intervention*—and that's state intervention, if the market's critical enough, and you can bet the labor market's critical. And because the state depends on ditch-diggers and prison guards and janitors and road-builders for its very being, then if these classes of people are no longer available, and the very survival of civil society depends on their existence, in the end, the state will just *take* them.

"You think our friends in Transnistria will have any qualms about rounding up people up at gunpoint and forcing them to do labor? The powerful are going to want their palaces kept nice and shiny. The liberal democracies will try volunteerism or lotteries or whatever, but you can bet that we're going to want our sewers to work, and somebody to carry our grandparents' bedpans, and the trucks to the supermarkets to run on time. And what *I'm* afraid of is that when things get desperate, we're not going to be any nicer about getting our way than those Sovietists of yours. We're going to make sure that the lower orders do their jobs, even if we have to kill half of them to convince the other half that we mean business. And the technical term for that is *slavery.* And if someone of African descent isn't sensitive to *that* potential problem, then I am very surprised!"

The fury in Stephanie's eyes was visible even through her shades, and he could see the pulse pounding in her throat. Then she said, "I'll save the *people,* that's what I'm good at. You save the rest of the world, *if* you can." She began to turn away, then swung back to him. "And by the way," she added, "fuck you!" turned, and marched away.

"Slavery or anarchy, Stephanie!" Terzian called, taking a step after. "That's the choice you're forcing on people!"

He really felt he had the rhetorical momentum now, and he wanted to enlarge the point by saying that he knew some people thought anarchy was a good thing, but no anarchist he'd ever met had ever even *seen* a real anarchy, or been in one, whereas Stephanie had—drop your anarchist out of a helicopter into the eastern Congo, say, with all his theories and with whatever he could carry on his back, and see how well he prospered. . . .

But Terzian never got to say any of these things, because Stephanie was gone, receding into the vanishing point of a busy street, the shoulder bag swinging back and forth across her butt like a pendulum powered by the force of her convictions.

Terzian thought that perhaps he'd never see her again, that he'd finally provoked her into abandoning him and continuing on her quest alone,

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but when he stepped off the bus in Montespèrtoli that night, he saw her across the street, shouting into her cell phone.

A day later, as with frozen civility they drank their morning coffee, she said that she was going to Rome the next day. "They might be looking for me there," she said, "because my parents live there. But I won't go near the family, I'll meet Odile at the airport and give her the papiloma."

Odile? Terzian thought. "I should go along," he said.

"What are you going to do?" she said, "carry that gun into an *airport*?"

"I don't have to take the gun. I'll leave it in the hotel room in Rome."

She considered. "Very well."

Again, that night, Terzian found the tumbled castle in Provence haunting his thoughts, that ruined relic of a bygone order, and once more considered stealing the papiloma and running. And again, he didn't.

They didn't get any farther than Florence, because Stephanie's cell phone rang as they waited in the train station. Odile was in Venice. *"Venezia?"* Stephanie shrieked in anger. She clenched her fists. There had been a cache of weapons found at the Fiumicino airport in Rome, and all planes had been diverted, Odile's to Marco Polo outside Venice. Frenzied booking agents had somehow found rooms for her despite the height of the tourist season.

Fiumicino hadn't been re-opened, and Odile didn't know how she was going to get to Rome. "Don't try!" Stephanie shouted. "I'll come to *you*."

This meant changing their tickets to Rome for tickets to Venice. Despite Stephanie's excellent Italian, the ticket seller clearly wished the crazy tourists would make up their mind which monuments of civilization they really wanted to see.

Strange—Terzian had actually *planned* to go to Venice in five days or so. He was scheduled to deliver a paper at the Conference of Classical and Modern Thought.

Maybe, if this whole thing was over by then, he'd read the paper after all. It wasn't a prospect he coveted: he would just be developing another footnote to a footnote.

The hills of Tuscany soon began to pour across the landscape like a green flood. The train slowed at one point—there was work going on on the tracks, men with bronze arms and hard hats—and Terzian wondered how, in the Plant People Future, in the land of Cockaigne, the tracks would ever get fixed, particularly in this heat. He supposed there were people who were meant by nature to fix tracks, who would repair tracks as an *avocation* or out of boredom regardless of whether they got paid for their time or not, but he suspected that there wouldn't be many of them.

You could build machines, he supposed, robots or something. But they had their own problems, they'd cause pollution and absorb resources and, on top of everything, they'd break down and have to be repaired. And who would do *that?*

If you can't employ the carrot, Terzian thought, if you can't reward people for doing necessary labor, then you have to use the stick. You march people out of the cities at gunpoint, like Pol Pot, because there's work that needs to be done.

He tapped his wedding ring on the arm of his chair and wondered what

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jobs would still have value. Education, he supposed; he'd made a good choice there. Some sorts of administration were necessary. There were people who were natural artists or bureaucrats or salesmen and who would do that job whether they were paid or not.

A woman came by with a cart and sold Terzian some coffee and a nutty snack product that he wasn't quite able to identify. And then he thought, *labor.*

"Labor," he said. In a world in which all basic commodities were provided, the thing that had most value was actual labor. Not the stuff that labor bought, but the work *itself.*

"Okay," he said, "it's labor that's rare and valuable, because people don't *have* to do it anymore. The currency has to be based on some kind of labor exchange—you purchase x hours with y dollars. Labor is the thing you use to pay taxes."

Stephanie gave Terzian a suspicious look. "What's the difference between that and slavery?"

"Have you been reading Nozick?" Terzian scolded. "The difference is the same as the difference between *paying taxes* and *being a slave.* All the time you don't spend paying your taxes is your own." He barked a laugh. "I'm resurrecting Labor Value Theory!" he said. "Adam Smith and Karl Marx are dancing a jig on their tombstones! In Plant People Land, the value is the *labor itself!* The *calories!*" He laughed again, and almost spilled coffee down his chest.

"You budget the whole thing in calories! The government promises to pay you a dollar's worth of calories in exchange for their currency! In order to keep the roads and the sewer lines going, a citizen owes the government a certain number of calories per year—he can either pay in person or hire someone else to do the job. And jobs can be budgeted in calories-per-hour, so that if you do hard physical labor, you owe fewer hours than someone with a desk job—that should keep the young, fit, impatient people doing the nasty jobs, so that they have more free time for their other pursuits." He chortled. "Oh, the intellectuals are going to just hate this! They're used to valuing their brain power over manual labor—I'm going to reverse their whole scale of values!"

Stephanie made a pffing sound. "The people I care about have no money to pay taxes at all."

"They have bodies. They can still be enslaved." Terzian got out his laptop. "Let me put my ideas together."

Terzian's frenetic two-fingered typing went on for the rest of the journey, all the way across the causeway that led into Venice. Stephanie gazed out the window at the lagoon soaring by, the soaring water birds, and the dirt and stink of industry. She kept the Nike bag in her lap until the train pulled into the Stazione Ferrovia della Stato Santa Lucia at the end of its long journey.

Odile's hotel was in Cannaregio, which, according to the map purchased in the station gift shop, was the district of the city nearest the station and away from most of the tourist sites. A brisk wind almost tore the map from their fingers as they left the station, and their vaporetto bucked a steep chop on the greygreen Grand Canal as it took them to the

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Ca' d' Oro, the fanciful white High Gothic palazzo that loomed like a frantic wedding cake above a swarm of bobbing gondolas and motorboats.

Stephanie puffed cigarettes, at first with ferocity, then with satisfaction. Once they got away from the Grand Canal and into Cannaregio itself, they quickly became lost. The twisted medieval streets were broken on occasion by still, silent canals, but the canals didn't seem to lead anywhere in particular. Cooking smells demonstrated that it was dinnertime, and there were few people about, and no tourists. Terzian's stomach rumbled. Sometimes the streets deteriorated into mere passages. Stephanie and Terzian were in such a passage, holding their map open against the wind and shouting directions at each other, when someone slugged Terzian from behind.

He went down on one knee with his head ringing and the taste of blood in his mouth, and then two people rather unexpectedly picked him up again, only to slam him against the passage wall. Through some miracle, he managed not to hit his head on the brickwork and knock himself out. He could smell garlic on the breath of one of the attackers. Air went out of him as he felt an elbow to his ribs.

It was the scream from Stephanie that concentrated his attention. There was violent motion in front of him, and he saw the Nike swoosh, and remembered that he was dealing with killers, and that he had a gun.

In an instant, Terzian had his rage back. He felt his lungs fill with the fury that spread through his body like a river of scalding blood. He planted his feet and twisted abruptly to his left, letting the strength come up his legs from the earth itself, and the man attached to his right arm gave a grunt of surprise and swung counterclockwise. Terzian twisted the other way, which budged the other man only a little, but which freed his right arm to claw into his right pants pocket.

And from this point on it was just the movement that he had rehearsed. Draw, thumb the safety, pull the trigger hard. He shot the man on his right and hit him in the groin. For a brief second, Terzian saw his pinched face, the face that reflected such pain that it folded in on itself, and he remembered Adrian falling in the Place Dauphine with just that look. Then he stuck the pistol in the ribs of the man on his left and fired twice. The arms that grappled him relaxed and fell away.

There were two more men grappling with Stephanie. That made four altogether, and Terzian reasoned dully that after the first three fucked up in Paris, the home office had sent a supervisor. One was trying to tug the Nike bag away, and Terzian lunged toward him and fired at a range of two meters, too close to miss, and the man dropped to the ground with a whuff of pain.

The last man had hold of Stephanie and swung her around, keeping her between himself and the pistol. Terzian could see the knife in his hand and recognized it as one he'd seen before. Her dark glasses were cockeyed on her face and Terzian caught a flash of her angry green eyes. He pointed the pistol at the knife man's face. He didn't dare shoot.

"*Police!*" he shrieked into the wind. "*Policia!*" He used the Spanish word. Bloody spittle spattered the cobblestones as he screamed.

In the Trashcanian's eyes, he saw fear, bafflement, rage.

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"Polizia!" He got the pronunciation right this time. He saw the rage in Stephanie's eyes, the fury that mirrored his own, and he saw her struggle against the man who held her.

"No!" he called. Too late. The knife man had too many decisions to make all at once, and Terzian figured he wasn't very bright to begin with. *Kill the hostages* was probably something he'd been taught on his first day at Goon School.

As Stephanie fell, Terzian fired, and kept firing as the man ran away. The killer broke out of the passageway into a little square, and then just fell down.

The slide of the automatic locked back as Terzian ran out of ammunition, and then he staggered forward to where Stephanie was bleeding to death on the cobbles.

Her throat had been cut and she couldn't speak. She gripped his arm as if she could drive her urgent message through the skin, with her nails. In her eyes, he saw frustrated rage, the rage he knew well, until at length he saw there nothing at all, a nothing he knew better than any other thing in the world.

He shouldered the Nike bag and staggered out of the passageway into the tiny Venetian square with its covered well. He took a street at random, and there was Odile's hotel. Of course: the Trashcanians had been staking it out.

It wasn't much of a hotel, and the scent of spice and garlic in the lobby suggested that the desk clerk was eating his dinner. Terzian went up the stair to Odile's room and knocked on the door. When she opened—she was a plump girl with big hips and a suntan—he tossed the Nike bag on the bed.

"You need to get back to Mogadishu right away," he said. "Stephanie just died for that."

Her eyes widened. Terzian stepped to the wash basin to clean the blood off as best he could. It was all he could do not to shriek with grief and anger.

"You take care of the starving," he said finally, "and I'll save the rest of the world."

Michelle rose from the sea near Torbiong's boat, having done thirty-six hundred calories' worth of research and caught a honeycomb grouper into the bargain. She traded the fish for the supplies he brought. "Any more blueberries?" she asked.

"Not this time." He peered down at her, narrowing his eyes against the bright shimmer of sun on the water. "That young man of yours is being quite a nuisance. He's keeping the turtles awake and scaring the fish."

The mermaid tucked away her wings and arranged herself in her rope sling. "Why don't you throw him off the island?"

"My authority doesn't run that far." He scratched his jaw. "He's interviewing people. Adding up all the places you've been seen. He'll find you pretty soon, I think."

"Not if I don't want to be found. He can yell all he likes, but I don't have to answer."

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"Well, maybe." Torbiong shook his head. "Thanks for the fish."

Michelle did some preliminary work with her new samples, and then abandoned them for anything new that her search spiders had discovered. She had a feeling she was on the verge of something colossal.

She carried her deck to her overhanging limb and let her legs dangle over the water while she looked through the new data. While paging through the new information, she ate something called a Raspberry Dynamo Bar that Torbiong had thrown in with her supplies. The old man must have included it as a joke: it was over-sweet and sticky with marshmallow and strangely flavored. She chucked it in the water and hoped it wouldn't poison any fish.

Stephanie Pais had been killed in what the news reports called a "street fight" among a group of foreign visitors. Since the authorities couldn't connect the foreigners to Pais, they had to assume she was an innocent bystander caught up in the violence. The papers didn't mention Terzian at all.

Michelle looked through pages of followup. The gun that had shot the four men had never been found, though nearby canals were dragged. Two of the foreigners had survived the fight, though one died eight weeks later from complications of an operation. The survivor maintained his innocence and claimed that a complete stranger had opened fire on him and his friends, but the judges hadn't believed him and sent him to prison. He lived a great many years and died in the Lightspeed War, along with most people caught in prisons during that deadly time.

One of the four men was Belorussian. Another Ukrainian. Another two Moldovan. All had served in the Soviet military in the past, in the Fourteenth Army in Transnistria. It frustrated Stephanie that she couldn't shout back in time to tell the Italians to connect these four to the murder of another ex-Soviet, seven weeks earlier, in Paris.

What the hell had Pais and Terzian been up to? Why were all these people with Transnistrian connections killing each other, and Pais?

Maybe it was Pais they'd been after all along. Her records at Santa Croce were missing, which was odd, because other personnel records from the time had survived. Perhaps someone was arranging that certain things not be known.

She tried a search on Santa Croce itself, and slogged through descriptions and mentions of a whole lot of Italian churches, including the famous one in Florence where Terzian and Pais had been seen at Machiavelli's tomb. She refined the search to the Santa Croce relief organization, and found immediately the fact that let it all fall into place.

Santa Croce had maintained a refugee camp in Moldova during the civil war following the establishment of Transnistria. Michelle was willing to bet that Stephanie Pais had served in that camp. She wondered if any of the other players had been residents there.

She looked at the list of other camps that Santa Croce had maintained in that period, which seemed to have been a busy one for them. One name struck her as familiar, and she had to think for a moment before she remembered why she knew it. It was at a Santa Croce camp in the Sidamo province of Ethiopia where the Green Leopard Plague had first broken out, the first transgenic epidemic.

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It had been the first real attempt to modify the human body at the cellular level, to help marginal populations synthesize their own food, and it had been primitive compared to the more successful mods that came later. The ideal design for the efficient use of chlorophyll was a leaf, not the homo sapien—the designer would have been better advised to create a plague that made its victims leafy, and later designers, aiming for the same effect, did exactly that. And Green Leopard's designer had forgotten that the epidermis already contains a solar-activated enzyme: melanin. The result on the African subjects was green skin mottled with dark splotches, like the black spots on an implausibly verdant leopard.

The Green Leopard Plague broke out in the Sidamo camp, then at other camps in the Horn of Africa. Then it leaped clean across the continent to Mozambique, where it first appeared at a Oxfam camp in the flood zone, spread rapidly across the continent, then leaped across oceans. It had been a generation before anyone found a way to disable it, and by then other transgenic modifiers had been released into the population, and there was no going back.

The world had entered Terzian's future, the one he had proclaimed at the Conference of Classical and Modern Thought.

What, Michelle thought excitedly, if Terzian had known about Green Leopard ahead of time? His Cornucopia Theory had seemed prescient precisely because Green Leopard appeared just a few weeks after he'd delivered his paper. But if those Eastern bloc thugs had been involved somehow in the plague's transmission, or were attempting to prevent Pais and Terzian from sneaking the modified virus to the camps. . . .

Yes! Michelle thought exultantly. That had to be it. No one had ever worked out where Green Leopard originated, but there had always been suspicion directed toward several semi-covert labs in the former Soviet empire. This was *it.* The only question was how Terzian, that American in Paris, had got involved. . . .

It had to be Stephanie, she thought. Stephanie, who Terzian had loved and who had loved him, and who had involved him in the desperate attempt to aid refugee populations.

For a moment, Michelle bathed in the beauty of the idea. Stephanie, dedicated and in love, had been murdered for her beliefs—realdeath!—and Terzian, broken-hearted, had carried on and brought the future—Michelle's present—into being. A *wonderful* story! And no one had known it till *now,* no one had understood Stephanie's sacrifice, or Terzian's grief . . . not until the lonely mermaid, working in isolation on her rock, had puzzled it out.

"Hello, Michelle," Darton said.

Michelle gave a cry of frustration and glared in fury down at her lover. He was in a yellow plastic kayak—kayaking was popular here, particularly in the Rock Islands—and had slipped his electric-powered boat along the margin of the island, moving in near-silence. He looked grimly up at her from below the pitcher plant that dangled below the overhang.

They had rebuilt him, of course, after his death. All the data was

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available in backup, in Delhi where he'd been taken apart, recorded, and rebuilt as an ape. He was back in a conventional male body, with the broad shoulders and white smile and short hairy bandy legs she remembered.

Michelle knew that he hadn't made any backups during their time in Belau. He had his memories up to the point where he'd lain down on the nanobed in Delhi. That had been the moment when his love of Michelle had been burning its hottest, when he had just made the commitment to live with Michelle as an ape in the Rock Islands.

That burning love had been consuming him in the weeks since his resurrection, and Michelle was glad of it, had been rejoicing in every desperate, unanswered message that Darton sent sizzling through the ether.

"Damn it," Michelle said, "I'm working."

<Talk to me> Darton's fingers formed. Michelle's fingers made a ruder reply.

"I don't understand," Darton said. "We were in love. We were going to be together."

"I'm not talking to you," Michelle said. She tried to concentrate on her video display.

"We were still together when the accident happened," Darton said. "I don't understand why we can't be together now."

"I'm not listening, either," said Michelle.

"I'm not leaving, Michelle!" Darton screamed. *"I'm not leaving till you talk to me!"*

White cockatoos shrieked in answer. Michelle quietly picked up her deck, rose to her feet, and headed inland. The voice that followed her was amplified, and she realized that Darton had brought his bullhorn.

"You can't get away, Michelle! You've got to tell me what happened!"

I'll tell you about Lisa Lee, she thought, *so you can send her desperate messages, too.*

Michelle had been deliriously happy for her first month in Belau, living in arboreal nests with Darton and spending the warm days describing their island's unique biology. It was their first vacation, in Prague, that had torn Michelle's happiness apart. It was there that they'd met Lisa Lee Baxter, the American tourist who thought apes were cute, and who wondered what these shaggy kids were doing so far from an arboreal habitat.

It wasn't long before Michelle realized that Lisa Lee was at least two hundred years old, and that behind her diamond-blue eyes was the withered, mummified soul that had drifted into Prague from some waterless desert of the spirit, a soul that required for its continued existence the blood and vitality of the young. Despite her age and presumed experience, Lisa Lee's ploys seemed to Michelle to be so *obvious,* so *blatant.* Darton fell for them all.

It was only because Lisa Lee had finally tired of him that Darton returned to Belau, chastened and solemn and desperate to be in love with Michelle again. But by then it was Michelle who was tired. And who had access to Darton's medical records from the downloads in Delhi.

"You can't get away, Michelle!"

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Well, maybe not. Michelle paused with one hand on the banyan's trunk. She closed her deck's display and stashed it in a mesh bag with some of her other stuff, then walked out again on the overhanging limb.

"I'm not going to talk to you like this," she said. "And you can't get onto the island from that side, the overhang's too acute."

"Fine," Darton said. The shouting had made him hoarse. "Come down here, then."

She rocked forward and dived off the limb. The salt water world exploded in her senses. She extended her wings and fluttered close to Darton's kayak, rose, and shook sea water from her eyes.

"There's a tunnel," she said. "It starts at about two meters and exits into the lake. You can swim it easily if you hold your breath."

"All right," he said. "Where is it?"

"Give me your anchor."

She took his anchor, floated to the bottom, and set it where it wouldn't damage the live coral.

She remembered the needle she'd taken to Jellyfish Lake, the needle she'd loaded with the mango extract to which Darton was violently allergic. Once in the midst of the jellyfish swarm, it had been easy to jab the needle into Darton's calf, then let it drop to the anoxic depths of the lake.

He probably thought she'd given him a playful pinch.

Michelle had exulted in Darton's death, the pallor, the labored breathing, the desperate pleading in the eyes.

It wasn't murder, after all, just a fourth-degree felony. They'd build a new Darton in a matter of days. What was the value of a human life, when it could be infinitely duplicated, and cheaply? As far as Michelle was concerned, Darton had amusement value only.

The rebuilt Darton still loved her, and Michelle enjoyed that as well, enjoyed the fact that she caused him anguish, that he would pay for ages for his betrayal of her love.

Linda Lee Baxter could take a few lessons from the mermaid, Michelle thought.

Michelle surfaced near the tunnel and raised a hand with the fingers set at <follow me>. Darton rolled off the kayak, still in his clothes, and splashed clumsily toward her.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked.

"Oh yes," Michelle replied. "You go first, I'll follow and pull you out if you get in trouble."

He loved her, of course. That was why he panted a few times for breath, filled his lungs, and dove.

Michelle had not, of course, bothered to mention that the tunnel was fifteen meters long, quite far to go on a single breath. She followed him, very interested in how this would turn out, and when Darton got into trouble in one of the narrow places and tried to back out, she grabbed his shoes and held him right where he was.

He fought hard but none of his kicks struck her. She would remember the look in his wide eyes for a long time, the thunderstruck disbelief in the instant before his breath exploded from his lungs and he died.

She wished that she could speak again the parting words she'd whis-

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pered into Darton's ear when he lay dying on the ridge above Jellyfish Lake. *"I've just killed you. And I'm going to do it again."*

But even if she could have spoken the words underwater, they would have been untrue. Michelle supposed this was the last time she could kill him. Twice was dangerous, but a third time would be too clear a pattern. She could end up in jail, though, of course, you only did severe prison time for realdeath.

She supposed that she would have to discover his body at some point, but if she cast the kayak adrift, it wouldn't have to be for a while. And then she'd be thunderstruck and grief-stricken that he'd thrown away his life on this desperate attempt to pursue her after she'd turned her back on him and gone inland, away from the sound of his voice.

Michelle looked forward to playing that part.

She pulled up the kayak's anchor and let it coast away on the six-knot tide, then folded away her wings and returned to her nest in the banyan tree. She let the breeze dry her skin and got her deck from its bag and contemplated the data about Terzian and Stephanie Pais and the outbreak of the Green Leopard Plague.

Stephanie had died for what she believed in, killed by the agents of an obscure, murderous regime. It had been Terzian who had shot those four men in her defense, that was clear to her now. And Terzian, who lived a long time and then died in the Lightspeed War along with a few billion other people, had loved Stephanie and kept her secret till his death, a secret shared with the others who loved Stephanie and who had spread the plague among the refugee populations of the world.

It was realdeath that people suffered then, the death that couldn't be corrected. Michelle knew that she understood that kind of death only as an intellectual abstract, not as something she would ever have to face or live with. To lose someone *permanently* . . . that was something she couldn't grasp. Even the ancients, who faced realdeath every day, hadn't been able to accept it, that's why they'd invented the myth of Heaven.

Michelle thought about Stephanie's death, the death that must have broken Terzian's heart, and she contemplated the secret Terzian had kept all those years, and she decided that she was not inclined to reveal it.

Oh, she'd give Davout the facts, that was what he paid her for. She'd tell him what she could find out about Stephanie and the Transnistrians. But she wouldn't mention the camps that Santa Croce had built across the starvation-scarred world, she wouldn't point him at Sidamo and Green Leopard. If he drew those conclusions himself, then obviously the secret was destined to be revealed. But she suspected he wouldn't—he was too old to connect those dots, not when obscure ex-Soviet entities and relief camps in the Horn of Africa were so far out of his reference.

Michelle would respect Terzian's love, and Stephanie's secret. She had some secrets of her own, after all.

The lonely mermaid finished her work for the day and sat on her overhanging limb to gaze down at the sea, and she wondered how long it would be before Darton called her again, and how she would torture him when he did. O

—With thanks to Dr. Stephen C. Lee.

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lady in waiting

look closely–
your ghost is blossoming inside you
even now
a thin carbon of your own features
floating just below the skin

she tries on outfits in your dressing room mirror
when you look away
bats her eyelashes and decides on a signature scent–
an exotic blend of papayas and Jamaican rum
that will linger in the hallway behind her–
you smell it on your lingerie

she mocks your birthmarks
wonders what scars your death will bring–
she doesn't want to be unsightly
her head hanging off at an angle
or a switchblade forever stuck in her side

she hopes you'll die young
and pretty
and soon–very soon–
she has a lot of living to do

–Cathy Tacinelli

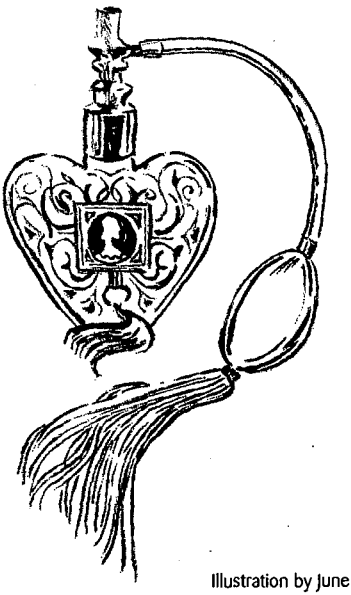

Illustration by June Levine

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THE MAN FROM SOMEWHERE

Jack Williamson

Now ninety-five, Jack Williamson spent his first three years high in the Sierra Madre of Sonora, Mexico, living in a stone ranch house with a grass roof and dirt floor. The year he was seven, the family moved by covered wagon from Pecos, Texas, to an insolated ranch in eastern New Mexico. He grew up there, learning to live in his own imagination. Dr. Williamson's first story sold in 1928. An Army weatherman in World War II, he flew on bombing raids over Bougainville and Rabaul. With a Ph.D. in English literature, he still teaches a class every spring semester at Eastern New Mexico University. His latest novel is *Terraforming Earth*. A section of it, "The Ultimate Earth," was published as a novella in *Analog's* December 2000 issue, and won the Hugo and the Nebula. The author is at work on *The Stonehenge Gate* for Tor. Looking back, he's happy with his life and grateful for good genes, good friends, and good luck.

1.

The naked man came limping along the sidewalk in the face of a brisk north wind, holding a ragged scrap of cardboard to hide his privates. He was shaking, his teeth chattering so loud I heard them a dozen yards away. He stopped in front of the house and stood peering at the old elm beside it, one hand raised to shade his eyes

It was a peaceful Sunday morning, with no traffic noise. My wife was setting the breakfast table. I'd thrown an old dressing gown over my pa-

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jamas and walked out to look for the paper. The air had a smoky tang of fall, and I'd stopped on the walk to catch a long breath of it before I saw him.

He wore a wild, iron-gray beard, with thin gray hair that fell to his bony shoulders. His lean hand shook with the cardboard, which had a black tire print across the words SIDE UP. He lifted his free hand to wave as if he thought he knew me, shrugged uncertainly, and shaded his eyes again.

Half ashamed of staring, I turned to pick up the paper from the fallen leaves under the half-bare elm.

"Hullo?" His voice was a rusty creak.

"Hello," I answered. "Can I help you?"

"Don't know." His haggard face crinkled with despair. "Lost. Frozen. Everything—" A fit of shivering checked him. "Can't remember."

I saw blood drying on his naked feet. My wife is tolerant of the unexpected. I asked if he wanted to come inside.

"Can't—remember." Whimpering like a hurt child, he shook his head. "Can't remember anything."

I caught his trembling arm. Sudden tears in his eyes, he dropped the cardboard, let me drape him in my housecoat, and limped after me into the kitchen. I'm a physician, a partner in a small suburban clinic. I sat him in a chair and got my emergency kit to take his vital signs. His body temperature was depressed, but not alarmingly. Everything else seemed normal.

"Bath?" He seemed to search for words. "Please. Need bathroom."

I led him to the bathroom, found him a towel, left him with the shower turned on hot. My wife wanted to call the police.

"They know who's missing. He must have family or friends anxious for him."

I delayed. Amnesia fascinates me and I thought he could be a classic case. Breakfast was ready when he came back from the bath, no longer shivering. At the table he ate his eggs and bacon with a ravenous appetite, but responded with helpless shrugs when my wife asked his name, where he was from, if he had family, if he could remember anybody. He was soon yawning groggily. We put him to bed in the guestroom. He slept until my wife called him for dinner.

He came out looking pale and haunted.

"Nothing," he muttered when she asked if he had remembered anything. "But I dreamed." His gaunt face twitched. "A horrid dream!"

With us at the table, he sat staring moodily at the tall clock by the door, a family relic built by my own grandfather. I poured wine, but he took only a single absent sip. My wife asked about the dream. Her voice seemed to startle him.

"Sorry." He shook himself. "A nightmare I can't forget."

"You might feel better," she told him, "if you just talk about it."

"I was in an airplane. Flying to New York. To see—to see a girl." He began haltingly, but spoke with growing animation. "Linda. Linda Zindler, that was her name. A slim little blonde who taught French lit at Columbia. She was just back from a summer in Paris, visiting her folks on Long

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Island. We'd quarreled over something. I was hoping to patch things up, but—"

His face tight as if in pain, he said no more till my wife asked what happened.

"It bugs me." He reached for his wineglass, pushed it away, and stared a long time at with her with a kind of terror in his eyes before he collected himself to go ahead. "I was in an aisle seat when we took off from LAX. The others were empty. Midway of the flight, a man came from the back of the plane to take the window seat."

He turned to peer groggily at me.

"A slender man about your size but older. He wore a loose black beret and mirror shades. Just another Hollywood type, I thought, till he pushed the shades up, polished the window with his handkerchief, and leaned to look out. All I could see was the blue haze under us, but he kept on looking. He hadn't said a word, but that made me wonder.

"The attendants were preparing for the landing at Kennedy when the pilot came on to say the landing would be delayed. He didn't say why, but passengers were already on the telephones. Rumors buzzed though the cabin. A big earthquake. The epicenter was out somewhere under the ocean, with damage far along the Atlantic coast.

"We circled over New York. The time was just past noon, the weather clear and bright. The stranger was leaning closer to the window. Looking over his shoulder, I found the skyline. Still familiar, but the ocean beyond it was draining out, uncovering a strange wilderness of mud flats and bare dark hills. I saw great canyons filled with racing white water.

"Somebody shouted 'Tsunami!' The uproar hushed. We watched the sea come back. An incredible wave that looked half a mile high. It curled over the city, hid it, covered everything. All I could see for a long time was white foam, dark water, the litter of ruin. The human bodies were too far for me to make them out, but I knew they were there.

"Millions killed. And Linda—"

Lips set white, he caught a long breath.

"The pilot kept us over it till the sea drained off again. In just half an hour—" He shivered. "The whole city was gone. Washed to bare rock, rivers of black mud, jungles of broken steel where towers had stood. I'd forgotten the man at the window till I saw him slumped against it.

"'The black hole!' Looking stricken, he was muttering to nobody. 'The baby black hole!'

"I wanted to know what he meant, but he got up, slid past me, and hurried away toward the lavatories at the back of the plane. People were yelling into the phones. Most of them got no answers. The pilot spoke to say we were being diverted to Cleveland. He begged for order and promised to land us safe.

"A minister in the front row stood up and wanted us to join in the Lord's Prayer. A few did. A man with him tried to lead us in 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic,' but his voice broke. People were crying. The attendants tried to silence hysterical children. Finally we landed.

"That's the end of the dream, except—" His voice had fallen to a husky whisper. "I wonder about that man in the black beret."

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He stopped at that, looking sick and shaken.

"Dreams are strange." My wife tried to comfort him. "Relax and eat your dinner."

"It seemed so real!" He peered at her and back at me. "Did it—did any earthquake happen?"

We had attended a medical convention in New York just the week before. I always missed the old Trade Center, but my wife assured him that nothing worse had taken place. He sipped his wine at last and finally accepted a second helping of her pot roast.

The old grandfather clock seemed to startle him when it pealed the half-hour. His animation gone, as if it brought the nightmare back, he sat squinting at it for a long minute before he asked us to excuse him and wandered moodily around the kitchen and the front hall before he shuffled back to his room.

2.

Next morning he still recalled nothing. Yet he seemed almost cheerful when I promised to get help for him. I took him down to the clinic to meet my partner, Fred Neblen, who is a top-rank internist. I keep Monday mornings open, and we gave him a battery of tests. Waiting for results, I took him to a clothing shop and bought him an outfit of essentials. He let a barber cut his hair and trim his beard to a neat Vandyke. He looked younger and vaguely familiar, but still I failed to place him.

"Physically you're okay," Neblen told him when the test results were in. "Nothing worse than evident exhaustion and mental stress. Mentally, I think you've suffered a severe trauma, something so painful you had to blot it out. You might see a psychiatrist. There are drugs we might try. The best thing we can do is get you back into your own environment."

With that environment still unknown, Neblen wanted to contact social services.

"Not yet." The stranger turned anxiously to me. "I don't want drugs. And I—" He shrank into his new blue suit as if against a sudden chill. "I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"I don't remember."

"Exactly," Neblen nodded. "That's your problem. You've got to have help."

He turned to me and I saw tears in his eyes. "Doctor, can't I just stay with you and your wife? For now, anyhow?"

He had the appeal of a frightened child, and I felt more than ever fascinated with his predicament. I took him back to the house. My wife was out, but I left him to take a nap in the guestroom. He was rubbing his deep-sunk eyes when he came out for dinner, and he stood blinking around him as if searching for anything familiar.

My wife agrees with me on the medical benefit of a little alcohol. We were sitting in the living room with our daily vodka and tonic. She gave the stranger a glass, but he had barely sipped it when the old clock

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struck. Its measured peals seemed to relax him, and he was suddenly ready to relate another dream.

"I was younger." His eyes widened as if in surprise. "No great tidal wave had ever hit New York. I had new degrees in math and physics from MIT, and I'd just accepted a position at Zindler Research." He squinted anxiously at me. "You've probably heard of Claudius Zindler?"

I shook my head.

"You haven't?" He seemed bewildered again. "I can't imagine why. He's famous. Or at least he was in the dream. A polymath. He'd made his name in quantum optics. He was a NASA adviser on the ion drive for the Mars Explorer. A pioneer in the theory of wireless power transmission. He was on his way to the top till he got sidetracked into what he called nano-singularities."

He saw that he had lost us.

"They are low-mass black holes." His eyes narrowed. "You know what black holes are?"

"I've heard the term. I don't know much."

"Nobody knows enough. Actually, nobody has ever seen one. By definition, they're invisible." He grinned as if the science had erased his troubles. "But solid evidence says they do exist. Gravity wells so deep that space at the bottom is squeezed to an infinitesimal point. Nothing that falls in can ever escape. Not even light; that's why they're black.

"There's a monster at the core of the galaxy. Such big ones swallow suns. Zindler was looking for something smaller, something he could study in the lab. He expected to find it in the cosmic radiation. His papers about it were controversial, but they fascinated me. I was delighted to get on with him. He advanced my bus fare and picked me up at the stop in a dusty little adobe town in New Mexico where nothing much had happened since Coronado's conquistadors.

"Zindler was an odd sort. A big fellow in blue jeans and cowboy boots. Lean but muscular, an old Stetson canted over his eyes. He'd grown up on a ranch. Learned there, I guess, to look for far horizons. He got into college as a football quarterback. The first step on his way to quantum infinities.

"He'd convinced some big power company that his patents could be worth billions. Persuaded them to build him a lab on a mountain somewhere north of Albuquerque. We ate enchiladas in a little Mexican café and he drove me up there in an old pickup, over a washed-out road that scared me silly. On our way up I asked what he hoped to get out of black holes.

"'Power!' His voice boomed with fervor for the future as he saw it. 'They devour matter, but Stephen Hawking discovered they radiate energy. If I can capture and control those nano-singularities, that Hawking radiation ought to give me a universal electric generator. Actual perpetual motion, out of units small enough to power cars and planes and homes.'

"He steered around a pothole, his face lit with that vision of a world transformed.

"'Hawking power could restore our wasted Earth. Terraform deserts. End famines. It would drive interplanetary flight. Maybe take us to other stars. Create wonders to come you can't imagine!'

The stranger shrugged and finally frowned.

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"Zindler was a great dreamer, but he'd run too far ahead of reality. If there are any nano-singularities in the cosmic rays, he hadn't found them. The failure had made him a prophet without honor anywhere. His recent papers had failed to pass peer review. The power people had cut off his funding.

"But he never quit. He'd found money for a scheme to manufacture his own nano-singularities, focusing gravity waves on microscopic metal beads. The wise old hands called him an idiot for that. Gravity waves might possibly exist, but nothing could possibly focus them. He snorted at the skeptics. Quantum science had been useful in its time, but he was looking for a better handle on the universe. He said he was finding it in what he called a sub-quark physics.

"He steered us around a rock and scowled at the road ahead. He said he was learning how to make nano-singularities, but now some crazy guy was trying to stop him. He fumbled in the glove compartment and dug out a book. *Cosmic Crapshoot: Planet Earth at Risk,* by John Monkhouse.

"'Monkhouse!' He muttered the name like a curse. 'He's out to scare the world and ruin me. He claims he's found fatal errors in my science—not that he has the wits to understand it. He claims my singularities could get out of control and destroy the planet. He wants the government to outlaw my research. His book is full of facts nobody has any right to know. Photos of my detectors and manipulators. Facsimiles of private notes I keep in the safe. Records of my blunders and corrections.'

"Zindler said he'd tried to sue, but Monkhouse was a pen name. The publisher refused to reveal anything about him. He'd hired a detective to investigate his former employees. They all came up clean. None of them had access to what was in the Monkhouse book.

"'An actual devil.' He shivered. 'He give me the creeps.'

"He jockeyed the pickup through a gully where the pavement was gone and glowered at me with his jaw set hard.

"'He'll never stop me, whoever he is. I've found enough funds to take us through the summer, and I'm finally getting real results. What we do will make you proud.' He gave me a quick brown grin. 'We'll show this Monkhouse up for the lunatic he is.'

"In a narrow canyon high toward the peak, we came to a chain stretched across the road. He rolled his window down and honked a horn. A man with a gun at his hip came out of the woods, spoke to him, and unlocked a padlock to lower the chain to let us pass.

"'Monkhouse!' he muttered again. 'He'll blow up the lab if he can ever get to it.'

"A little farther on, I saw a yellow coyote in the road ahead of us. Zindler jammed on the brakes. The pickup lurched toward the ditch. I guess that woke me."

3.

One of my friends is Amur Shafique, a psychiatrist who shares my interest in amnesia. The stranger agreed to let me call him. He came over

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after dinner with his tape recorder and heard the stranger recount those disturbing dreams. We had a long discussion over a Scotch and soda after the man had begun to yawn and we let him limp away to bed.

"Very odd!" Shafique thanked me for calling him over and shook his head. "A real phenomenon. The visions are too vivid, too specific, too consistent internally, for any easy explanation. You know—"

He frowned and sipped his drink.

"I've looked at all the evidence for precognition. Some of it's compelling. Never quite convincing. But this—" He drained his glass and rose to go. "I want to see the fellow again."

The stranger came out late next morning, too agitated to touch his breakfast.

"I lay awake half the night." The coffee cup was shaking in his hand. He spilled a little and set it back before it touched his lips. "Afraid to sleep. Afraid—afraid to dream again. Shafique says there's something I've got to face. But after last night—"

He reached for his coffee again and took both hands to get it to his lips.

"The clock had struck eleven before I dozed off. And I don't know. Maybe Shafique—" The cup rattled in the saucer when he tried to set it down. "I was in a farm truck loaded with household goods. It was after the Atlantic tsunami. The driver and his wife were running away from a chain of new disasters somewhere in Missouri. Terrible quakes. Lava floods. The whole world going—"

He bit his lip and caught his breath.

"The farmer had the radio on. A lot of static, but I caught talk about the whole continent splitting through the middle, along what some geologist called the New Madrid fault. A chain of new volcanoes. Deadly pyroclastic flows. I heard a dozen theories of the cause, but nothing of any black hole.

"We were somewhere in Missouri, driving west through mobs of people in desperate flight. Roads were jammed with cars and trucks and buses. People on bikes. On horses. On foot. All of them running from a terrible rain of fire. I never saw any volcano. Nothing except a dim red glow of fire in a great black cloud, alive with lightning, rolling after us.

"It came overhead. Ash fell out of it like red-hot snow. Great drops of thick gray mud fouled the windshield in spite of the wipers. The farmer cursed his luck and cursed Claudius Zindler and drove too fast, trying to keep ahead of the lava flood.

"Blind with the mud, he didn't see the wreck, not till we were on top of it. A jackknifed truck and trailer. A car off a side road had crashed into it. The farmer got us around it, but the world was shaking under us. We went off the road and into a gully. The truck rolled over. The wind caught us there.

"A blast of fire with a hot sulfur stink, howling out of the east. It hit me like a fist in the chest. Scorched my face. I couldn't breathe. I saw the farmer lying under the truck, his mouth wide open. Blind with the mud in his eyes. The woman was gasping for air, trying to drag him free.

"The ground thundered under me. It shook me off my feet. I remember falling. But then—"

The stranger shuddered and sat blinking at nothing till my wife asked

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if he couldn't eat his breakfast now. He shook his head with a pale apologetic smile and turned back to me.

"Maybe you and Dr. Shafique can help me understand."

"I'll call him," I said. "He does want to see you."

"I hope," he whispered. "Because the dream went on."

He reached for his coffee cup and saw that it was empty. My wife hurried to fill it. He thanked her absently and forgot to pick it up. For a long minute, he sat squinting at a stained-glass plaque that hung in the window, a house-warming gift from my wife's mother.

"Yes?" she said.

He blinked at her and went on.

"One second I was lying in the mud at the bottom of that gully. Gasping for air that burned my lungs. The ground under me roared and shuddered like something alive. Red-hot rocks hailed down around us. Something hit me. The pain—"

He winced and scowled at the plaque.

"Maybe Shafique can explain what saved me. I woke up lying in bed, somewhere with white curtains around me." He shook his head. "The fire and thunder and pain were gone. The quiet hit me like another shock. I guess I was sedated. I remember a doctor, a busy little man in a white jacket. He pulled the sheet back to inspect me through big round gold-framed glasses and put a cold stethoscope to my chest. He spoke to me and called the nurse in a language I didn't know.

"The nurses—"

He shut his dark-rimmed eyes and sat rigid for another minute.

"Not human at all. They gave me dreadful dreams till I got well enough to like them. They were naked and hairless, with silvery scales for skin and limbs that looked boneless as snakes. Their heads were tapered like a dolphin's, with white-toothed jaws at the top. They breathed though slits in their necks.

"Their eyes—"

He stopped to squint at me.

"Long green eyes, set on the sides of the heads like a chicken's, looking in opposite directions. They had the chicken's way of moving their heads in quick little jerks, I guess to get an effect of stereo vision. All of them were male. The sex organs are internal, but the penis makes a ridge under a neat little triangle of amber-colored scales."

He stopped again. "If you believe me—"

I begged him to go on.

"I know it sounds insane." He seemed somehow apologetic. "I used to wonder if I was dead, revived in some unlikely hereafter. Not that it mattered, not till my head began to clear. When I found the first crumb of sanity, it was the doctor. He looked oddly young, almost like a child. His pink-skinned body seemed too small for his hairless head. It moved in a quick and graceful way, like a bird's. Or maybe like the nurses. I used to wonder—"

He stopped to shake his head.

"The doctor." He squinted at a Norman Rockwell print my wife has over the kitchen stove, a country doctor examining a doll for a little girl. He caught himself and went on. "Odd enough, but certainly more human

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than the nurses. For a long time I felt too weak and sick to wonder or even care where I was. When I got the wits to ask, he knew no English. I think what he spoke was a blend of Russian and Chinese.

"The head nurse became our translator. Big Jim Fish. That's what I came to call him when we could talk. He was taller than the others, with copper-colored scales on his tapered head. His featureless face could pucker into what I learned to see as a smile. He used to take my pulse and temperature and palpate my body with his odd three-fingered hand. He was smart as anybody, reading the green symbols shining on the little stand by my bed and tapping the keys of something like a computer with his triple thumbs. He liked to joke about how different I was.

"When he turned me in bed, I found a wall of something like glass. A big window on a world I didn't understand. A brick-red landscape scattered with broken rocks. Not a blade of green anywhere. A small dim sun shone out of a dusty yellow sky.

"At night I could see stars. I found the Milky Way and Orion and the Big Dipper, but there was an Evening Star that looked brighter than Venus or Jupiter ever did. The gravity was stranger than the sky, everything a lot lighter. When I dropped anything, I had time enough to grab it. I was able to stand before I had any strength at all, but my balance was off. Fish had to help me learn to walk.

"Beyond the window, a score of creatures like him were at work, carrying baskets of rock and dust out of a deep pit. They wore transparent suits and glassy bubbles over their heads. Some of them were screening the rubble, sorting something out. Once I saw a human skull.

"I learned what little I could. Fish and the nurses had a language of their own, with crackling consonants and vowels that sounded like little dogs yelping. Fish laughed when I tried to imitate him. A sound like a big cat purring. His vocal organs were a poor fit for English, but he knew the doctor's language.

"He let me teach him a little English, enough to let him tell me we were on Mars, at the site where the refugees from Earth had settled. A grim environment, but they survived there until they developed the star drive that took them on to Fish's planet, which they called New Hope. It's light-years away.

"The doctor's name was Nikolay Chen. He'd come back from New Hope. Back out of the future. He and his crew were excavating the abandoned site and studying the bright new star that had been the Earth. He was trying to recover what he could of Earth's history and culture.

"I had questions of my own that Fish tried to answer.

"'Hyperslider,' he called the space-time machine that had brought them back to Mars. 'Slide around space dimensions. Time dimension also. Dr. Nikolay Chen dig Mars site. Study singularity. Collect artifacts. You early human specimen. Pick from hot lava flow.'

"When I asked about the singularity, he took me up to an instrument room high in the dome and showed me an image on the screen of an electronic telescope. A great flat disk, it burned red at the rim and bright blue toward the center. It seemed to be spinning like a top. Long jets of bright white fire blazed along the axis out of its heart.

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"'Planet once,' Fish said. 'Once you people home.'

"I stood there a long time held by its terrible splendor, remembering Linda, remembering Claudius Zindler and his nano-singularities, remembering John Monkhouse and his warnings, remembering the night on the mountain when I bombed Zindler's laboratory, remembering how he said I'd set his growing black hole free to destroy everything.

"I shrank away at last, swept with a sick regret.

4.

"How long I was there on Mars I never knew. I had no clock or calendar. Fish wore no timepiece and seemed to need none. The old Earth was no longer there to count the days and years. Its blazing remnant moved on a cycle of its own, disappearing from the evening sky, returning before the Martian dawn, back again at dusk, a motion meaningless to me.

"For a long time, talking to Fish and Chen was the only reason I had to stay alive. Fish learned more English and I learned to understand his amphibian voice. Our first texts were stray relics of Earth, an old volume of the Britannica and a paperback copy of Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*. He liked to talk, whistling and quacking his English. I asked about his people and their world.

"'We amphibs.' Proudly, he tilted his bright-scaled head. 'Amphib planet good for amphibs. Not much good for you people.'

"Chen had rescued me to be a sort of native informant. I learned all I could from him. New Hope is no new Earth. Its two major continents are over the poles, with only immense ocean in between. Its year is nearly five of Old Earth's. Its polar axis is tipped far out of the ecliptic plane, to let the overhead sun creep through its year from one pole to the other. That makes the seasons extreme. Two Earth-years of broiling summer, a big red sun always in the sky. The winters are ice ages of bitter, moonless darkness.

"'We amphibs ocean people,' Fish said. 'Land no good for life.'

"Yet, for the refugees, New Hope had been better than Mars. They landed at the tip of a peninsula that runs toward the equator from the south continent. Chen showed me videos. Mostly snow and ocean, but jungle stuff grows rank in the summers along the continental fringes. The winters kill it back.

"The amphibians own the ocean, as Chen put it. The polar ice caps never thaw, but the colonists have settled fertile spots between the ice and the sea. A few stubborn souls defy the winters from tunnels under the ice, but most of them shuttle back and forth with the sun. Farmers with fields on both continents can grow crops all around the year. The two races made friends. The amphibs helped the colonists adapt. They now keep the males alive, those like Fish that fail to find a mate.

"Curious people. I wish I'd known them better." He sat for a moment smiling reflectively at the Norman Rockwell print. "They live without the basics of our civilization. No fire or metals, no writing, no wheels or electricity. Yet they have a culture I admire."

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He sighed and turned thoughtfully back to us.

"'No need fire,' Fish said. 'Songs enough for us.'

"I remember videos of a rough rock tower the amphib males had built. It stands on the point of a narrow headland at the mouth of a cliff-walled fjord. Sheer black cliffs fall to white surf far below. In springtime views, the fjord is choked with ice from melting glaciers but the native jungle is already a heavy green crown on the cliffs. In winter scenes, snows have covered the tower to the level of a balcony around the top.

"'Song tower,' Fish called it. 'Songs for women.'

"I asked about the women.

"'Different," he said. 'Bigger than men. Breathe seawater. Homes on sea floor. Men breathe air. Live only on land. Men sing for women.' His scales rippled in what I had learned was a rueful shrug. 'Some women come to singer. No woman for me.'

"Chen showed me videos taken from the tower. White water breaking over rocks out beyond the beach. Farther out, creatures like dolphins leaping out of the waves and swimming toward land.

"Mating season, he said. In the fall of the long year. The males sing from that tower or any high rock they can find. The females answer when they please. The lucky males swim out to meet the females. They couple. The females carry them away to sea. Most never get back. The winters used to kill the few that did, before the colonists arrived.

"Fish told me his own story. He grew up there at the mouth of the fjord, living through the summer on fruit he found in the jungle and shellfish he learned to dig. Fall came. He listened and climbed the tower to answer when he heard a woman singing. Her voice was beautiful. They exchanged their names, sounds I never learned to utter. He sang me the nuptial song he had made of her name, and said it bound them together forever.

"'Happy day.' He smiled, bright white teeth shining across the crown of his sleek-scaled head. 'Swam out to tall rock. Climbed rock. Sang again. Listened again. Woman sang again. Promise of joy and place in odes of ocean. Dived off rock. Swam toward woman, but waves too tall. Sweep me back to rocks.'

"His sleek head sagged, the smile erased.

"'Sang again. Dived again. Waves too tall again for poor Jim Fish.'

"Chen told me how the females ride back on the high tides when the ice breaks up in the spring. They lie on the beaches long enough to give birth, and go out again on the next tide. The young females are able to swim with them. The young males are left like Fish to grow up on shore in the summer and sing for a lover when the season turns."

In a vaguely troubled way, he glanced at the clock and the Rockwell print, frowned again at the stained-glass plaque as if something about it troubled him. It's a blood-red rose my wife's mother made the summer before we married. Neat enough, but nothing remarkable.

"In spite of all that," he went on abruptly, "I think Fish was homesick. He learned to operate the video machine and ran his favorite scenes again and again. A huge red sun rising out of a stormy ocean. Winter ice breaking up in the fjord. The first green of spring in the hills beyond the tower.

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"'Soon go home.' We were looking at a scene of females playing in the waves out beyond the breakers. 'New song to sing. Song of land adventure and exciting singularity.' His body flexed to a graceful shrug. 'Young daughters prefer sons of recent season, but elder mothers do return.'

"With a sudden display of affection, Fish wrapped a slick-scaled arm around me.

"'Sorry you not come with us.'

5.

"That was a painful jolt. I'd known the expedition would be returning and hoped for a new life on New Hope. When I tried to ask why they meant to leave me, Chen put me off. His own time here on Mars was running out. He was busy with the dig. Most of the recovered artifacts were waiting to be examined and catalogued. His study of the singularity was not complete. He said we had no language for the math of hypertime.

"I watched his preparations to close down the dig. The amphibians filled up the pit and dismantled the digging machine. Chen sorted and crated his collected artifacts. He automated his telescopes and spectrometers to store their data on the accretion disk and the plasma plumes.

"Yet at last he did ask me to dine with him in his office, high in the dome. Beyond the big window, the remnant of Earth shone low in the twilight, tinged pink from a dust storm. Only a star, it was still bright enough to cast shadows. Fish served the meal, the main course the big yellow fruit of a New Hope sea plant. He sat with us to translate.

"Hopefully, I asked Chen to take me with him back to New Hope.

"'Impossible.'

"Soberly, he pushed his plate away and leaned across the table to explain. Fish had become pretty fluent by then, but his first translations baffled me. I asked more questions till I thought I understood. Here's the way I got it, if I can make it clear.

"It's all a matter of perception."

The stranger frowned and rubbed his jaw, trying to find words for what he thought he understood.

"You felt that you were making a free choice when you saw me naked on the sidewalk and decided to bring me in. I am deeply grateful to you, but as Chen saw the universe, you had no choice at all. We're all victims of a basic paradox. Quantum laws do seem to shape the universe, yet Chen saw quantum uncertainty as illusion. He said we should learn to see the whole, from a point outside space and time. Seen that way, it's simply there, changeless and complete.

"Here inside it, we never see it all. Our perceptions are only a moving moment, carried by quantum waves along the time lines that trace the history of every particle from its origin to its end. Chen told me to imagine the conscious mind as a lantern we carry from birth to death through the dark tunnel of time.

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"'Look at the alternative,' he said.

"Any real quantum uncertainty would have to create new possibilities. Branches in the lines of time. Every time an electron changes orbit you'd have a new chain of possible cause and effect. A new universe. You'd have an infinite multiplication of worlds that would bloat the cosmos into an absurdity forbidden by the fundamentals of physics.

"Mass and energy have to be conserved.

"When I stuck to the notion of free will, Chen brought up Gödel's old proof that every system of thought leads to paradoxes it can't resolve. All motion, he said, is mere illusion. So is our sense of the present moment, our sense of passing time, our belief in our own freedom of action. Life and mind themselves are illusion.

"I said that defied common sense.

"He shrugged. Quantum physics, he said, has always defied common sense. He recalled old Einstein, a man of good common sense who refused to believe that God plays dice with the universe. He never accepted the principle of quantum uncertainty, yet it's proved every time an atom splits.

"Still a skeptic, I asked Chen how his laws of time had let him come back from New Hope. Travel in time, he said, was just one more illusion. When he turned his life back to the past, he was simply lighting his way along a time track as old as the universe itself.

"'That lava flow must have cut my lines of time on Earth,' I told him. 'I was dying. How were you able to meddle with that?'

"'No meddling.' Chen shrugged. 'The lava flow had broken your lifeline. Set you free of time. That left us pick you up and bring you here.'

"He'd used a device he called a chronoscope to search the history of Earth. Its sub-quantum forces let him trace the lines of time and see past events. Or he could amplify the force to stretch them and let him reach or change the past. The lines spring back, however, when the force is removed. The static universe restores itself. The future is as rigid as the past, freedom of the will always sheer illusion.

"He was rising to leave the table. I stopped him with more questions.

"How far back in time could he go? Back to Claudius Zindler's childhood? Couldn't Zindler's life be set on a different track? Couldn't the escape of his baby black hole be prevented? Couldn't the Earth be saved?'

"He listened to me, and frowned at that red star setting in the west.

"'I thought of that. In fact I came back to do it.' He shook his hairless head and turned slowly back to me. 'But I've been here too long and seen too much of the ancient Earth. I've watched a million generations live and love and die, making it what it was. Something wonderful! Perhaps unique in the universe.

"'But their heirs—'

"His face set hard and he spoke with a savage force.

"'Earth was sick and dying before Zindler ever saw it. Swarming with ape-men in suits driven by the morals of the jungle, but loose to play their crazy games with high technologies they never even tried to understand. They were plundering the planet. Wasting their great legacy. Fighting senseless wars, killing one another for nothing.

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"'Earth wasn't worth saving!'

"Chen stalked toward the door and turned suddenly back.

"'But I think humanity may be.' His tone had softened. 'The colonists here on Mars and then on New Hope faced hard new conditions for survival. Severe environments, that forced them into a major leap in racial evolution. As few as we are, I think we on New Hope have a better chance than Old Earth ever did.'

"Next morning I woke alone. Listening for amphibian chatter, I heard total silence. The halls were empty when I walked them. Chen gone from his office, the crates of artifacts gone from the storeroom inside the air lock. I thought I'd been left alone on Mars, the only human being this side of the stars."

6.

My wife was trained in medical records. We'd met when she came to keep our records at the clinic. She still works part time there. We left the stranger in the house, with the morning paper and a sandwich in the fridge for his lunch. He was asleep in his room when we got back. My wife called to wake him for dinner. He stumbled out squinting around him as if still uncertain where he was. I was heating the grill for lamb chops. She set a place for him, but he said he didn't feel like eating.

"A long day," he said. "I walked all over the neighborhood, trying to remember. You know—" He stopped to peer around in a baffled way. "You know, I think I've been here before. Maybe in this very house. Did anybody else ever live here?

"Nobody," my wife said. "We had it built after we married."

I told him I'd made an appointment for Shafique to see him.

"The nut cracker?" He blinked at me dismally. "Do you think I'm really crazy?"

"Nothing like that." I tried to cheer him. "Shafique agrees that it's only a transient amnesia. Perhaps a fugue state. Just uncover the emotional shock that caused the denial or escape, and we'll have your memory back. We can try hypnosis, but now he wants to look for suggestive symbols in your dreams."

"Nightmares!" He seemed angry at himself. "I just had another. Crazier every time. No sense to them."

He stalked around the back yard while I grilled the chops, as if looking for his lost memory under the rose bushes or behind the tool shed. He seemed to find nothing he liked, yet the fragrant smoke woke his appetite. He ate heartily enough. We were finishing a second glass of wine when the old clock struck. He sat listening, gaping at it, counting the strikes. They stopped at seven, but his voice went on, hoarse and loud.

"Eight . . . nine . . . ten."

He caught himself and shrugged sheepishly at me.

"That clock," he whispered. "I know I've heard it somewhere. Sometime. Striking in the dark."

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7.

Shafique gave him an hour, taped his latest dreams, and wrote him a stress reduction prescription. Next morning we found him sitting in the kitchen, watching the clock as if afraid for it to strike again. He jumped when I spoke, but sat back and turned to us with an air of bleak uncertainty.

"Maybe I've begun to remember." He licked his dry lips. "If I could understand just where I am."

"You're right here," my wife told him. "Dr. Shafique says you'll soon be okay. I'll get you some coffee and make us a ham omelet for breakfast."

She's proud of our new house. Seeming not to care about breakfast, he peered around the kitchen and shrugged at its shining perfection.

"Everything," he muttered. "Everywhere. So out of date. The cars on the street all antiques. I see people on TV that I thought were dead. I—I don't belong."

He shook his head and sat frowning at the clock.

"It woke me last night, striking twelve. Woke me from another nightmare. I was back at Zindler's lab on the mountain. I'd slipped past the guard. Climbed over that chain stretched across the road. I was carrying four sticks of dynamite, taped together with a detonator. He'd fired me when we fell out, but I still had my keys to the lab.

"I got in through a side door, put the bomb under his gravity wave apparatus, lit the fuse, and ran a hundred yards down the road to wait. There was a heavy thump. Fire exploded through the windows. In a few minutes the whole building was blazing. I was still there watching it when Zindler came running out of the smoke, dressed in his nightshirt and yelling at me.

"'You damned idiot!'

"I had a gun. I waved it to stop him. He stalked on toward me.

"'If you thought I was about to kill the Earth, you've done it yourself.'

"I stood there gaping at him.

"'Kill me if you want.' He ignored the gun. 'Nothing matters now. I had the singularity well contained. Your stupid sabotage has spilled it out of containment. Do you know what it will do?'

"A fit of coughing doubled him. Blazing cinders were raining down around us. Hot smoke had choked him, and he stood shaking his fists till he could speak again.

"'Nothing we do can touch it now. It's still smaller than an atom, but heavy enough to fall through the floor, down through the mountain, down to the center of the Earth.'

"I tried to deny the danger. Tried to quote Hawking, who said small black holes would be harmless. Radiating energy, they would shrink and evaporate. I'd hoped to get rid of his before it grew beyond the critical limit.

"Zindler cut me off, looking sick. His singularity had already grown beyond that limit. He said it would keep on growing. Slowly at first, because growth still had to depend on quantum tunneling. It would grow faster as the radius of capture increased.

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"'You—you—"

"Strangling in a gust of hot smoke, he stabbed a shaking finger at me.

"'Have you forgotten? A black hole spins like the armature of a dynamo. It generates electricity. That will make heat. You've lit a fire in the core of the Earth. The heat will raise magma plumes. You'll see quakes. Volcanoes. Cataclysms and worse cataclysms, till whole continents go. Till the planet implodes.'

"'You've murdered the Earth.'

"You can imagine how that hit me."

The stranger seemed to shrivel into himself. He sat for a moment blinking at the old clock before he pulled together and seemed to relax, turning with a pale smile for my wife when she filled his cup.

"Good coffee." He sipped it and nodded in appreciation. "Something I missed on Mars. Chen and Jim Fish fed me well enough when I got used to their New Hope stuff, but they had no coffee."

The hands of the clock were on the half hour and he sat watching till it struck.

"That helps." He nodded at the clock. "Helps me find my place in time. Chen came back in time to grab me out of that pumice rain. I'm farther back now, back to a time before I was born."

He sighed and paused to think.

"I must have been a pretty normal kid. I remember reading comics and hating school and playing soccer. I built model rockets. I longed for a berth on the Mars Explorer till they found I was colorblind. I earned my degrees at MIT, went from there to Zindler's lab.

"At first I liked the man. He excited me, though his notions of Hawking power were hard for me to swallow. My own field was particle physics. The black holes I knew about were more theory than fact and trillions of miles away. Yet I stayed there with him most of a year.

"His sister came out to see him on a summer vacation from Columbia. Linda—" He shook his head, with a wistful sight. "Linda Zindler. She didn't understand black holes or even want to. He was too far down in his own black hole to do much with her. That left a chance for me. My best summer ever! We found open snow on the north slope. She taught me to ski.

"If—"

He drew a long breath.

"We'd begun to dream of a life together. But one night." He caught himself with a grimace of pain. "We were all three living in a trailer home somebody had dragged up to the lab. Linda was baking potatoes and I was grilling steaks for dinner. Claude was working day and night, trying to manufacture his own singularities.

"When I went to get him out of the lab, he had no time to eat.

"'Eureka!' he yelled at me. 'I've got one!'

"When he had time to talk, I tried to warn him that he was playing with very dangerous fire. He laughed at me. Stephen Hawking had proved that small black holes don't last. His would be gone in an hour unless he kept it fed with hydrogen ions.

"He'd written a paper about his work. *Science* rejected it when the peer reviewers called him a crackpot. They said gravity waves would be im-

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possible to focus, black holes of any size impossible to contain, any radiation from them impossible to control. In spite of that, he'd somehow got the funds to carry on. I did my best to stop him. Kept protesting till he fired me. Linda took his side. Finally, I remember—"

He fell silent for a time, his gaunt face working.

"Zindler never went public with the mishap, or even accused me of arson. After all, he had his own share in the crime. Knowing the truth could help nobody. We went back to the trailer and talked till daylight. I don't know what he told Linda. She tried not to hurt me, but we were never close again."

He caught a long breath.

"That was a lifetime ago, but it's fresh as yesterday now that I remember. The fact. The grief. The pain. The absolute despair."

"You meant no harm," my wife said.

"Which only made it worse." His voice was flat and dead. "I'd seen disaster coming and failed to stop it. I tried to excuse myself in every way I could, tried to believe Zindler's little nano-singularity would in fact evaporate.

"It didn't."

He sighed and glanced again at the old clock as if expecting it so speak.

"I tried to wash my failure out with alcohol. That did no good. I drove my car into a freight train. Woke up in a hospital bed and lay there for months in the pain I deserved, still praying for any miracle that might save the Earth. Miracles don't happen, not in Chen's universe."

His fingers were tracing a long blue scar across his leathery cheek.

"I never saw Zindler again, but Linda came to see me at the hospital. She never quite forgave me, but she did convince me that my own unlucky life had to go on."

Lips tight, he sighed.

"I learned to walk again. Waiting for the end, I learned what I could about seismology and volcanology and tried to face the future. I got the jobs I could. Drove a truck. Taught high school science. Sold high-tech medical equipment. Even tried to hope for a new life with Linda."

Painfully, he grinned.

"Zindler was a better man than I ever was. He gave up his schemes for Hawking power and went back to Project Mars. I heard from Linda that he'd gone out to the colony. He wanted to make a place there for her, but she wouldn't leave her folks.

"Those last few weeks—"

His weathered face set hard.

"Earth's crust went fast when the lava plumes finally reached it. Civilization was gone, almost overnight. Transport, phones, radio, law and order. Trapped there in Cinci, trying to get home, I saw looting, robbery, murder. Yet I remember acts of heroism, acts of love, acts of vigilante justice. Little family groups were getting together anywhere they could. Singing, praying, making love while they waited.

"I was there till I found a little group of friends—in those final days, we all looked for friends. A pilot, a mechanic, an ex-Marine. The pilot knew a millionaire who'd owned a private jet. We found his house empty, the cars

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gone, a corpse rotting on the drive. The plane was still in the hangar when we broke the lock, with gas enough to take us west. We got across Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and ran into a wall of new volcanoes. The engines died, ruined by volcanic ash. We crashed somewhere in Missouri.

"The pilot was hurt. His friends stayed with him. I went on anyhow I could. On a makeshift crutch the day that farmer and his wife picked me up. Great people. They shared what they had. A few ripe apples and a loaf of homemade bread. The woman showed me photos of the son they hoped to find in Kansas City.

"They never got there. I remember gasping for life, broiling in the sulfur fumes, and waking up in bed on Mars. Chen and his amphibian team finished their dig and went home to New Hope. Left there alone, I had time enough to regret my sins and look for comfort in Chen's theory of time.

"If free will was illusion, if my life was only one fixed instant in the infinite lines of time, if I'd never had an actual choice, I shouldn't blame myself. Yet I had to believe the illusion, to accept what Chen called the infinite obsession of life. The guilt was mine to bear forever.

"I don't know how long—"

He stopped to frown at the clock.

"The Martian days are about as long as ours, but I didn't try to count them. Chen had left food and water for me. I stayed alive and watched what I'd done to Earth. Watched the accretion disk and the plasma plumes blazing in the hazy dusks and dawns.

"Till Fish came back."

He wiped his wet eyes with the back of his hand.

"My final friend. He was human as I am, even with the way he had to twist his copper-scaled head to see me with one long green eye. I hugged him. That seemed to startle him, but then he wrapped his finny arms around me and we talked.

"'Home planet again. Climbed song tower. Heard women call from sea. None for Big Jim Fish. Young daughters want young sons. Elder mothers choose men who share wisdom of the sea. None care for song of far singularity consuming ancient Earth. Difficult time for Fish.'

"His sleek head shook, and his quacking voice had a somber note.

"'Dr. Chen offer alternative. Return Fish here. Monitor instruments. Record essential data. Bring condolence you. Dr. Chen promise soon return. Erect Earth memorial.'

"I thanked him, but I didn't want any Earth memorial. In spite of all Chen said about the laws of time and the worth of Earth, I thought I saw one last chance to save it."

A shaft of the morning sun had struck through that stained-glass plaque in the window and swung across the neglected breakfast table to paint a rainbow pattern on the stranger's haggard face. He raised his hand to shade his eyes and waited in dismal silence while my wife rose to drawn the curtain.

"Thank you," he whispered. "You've been good to me."

She asked him to go on.

"I got help from Fish," he said. "He'd been Chen's pilot on the trips to

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trace the fatal chain. The events that set the singularity free. They looked at my life and found nothing they could hope to change. The weakest link appeared to be the birth of Claudius Zindler.

"Yet I'm guilty of one last blunder—"

He was rasping hoarsely, his face twisted with pain.

"I persuaded Fish to fly me back to Earth, back to the date Chen calculated for Zindler's conception. I carried a pistol and a box of ammunition from the recovered artifacts. I meant to kill Zindler's parents if I had to."

He'd bitten his lip. I saw a streak of blood down his chin.

"Fish brought me back to Chen's selected target point. Dropped me here." He shivered. "The next thing I knew, the gun and my clothing were gone. I suppose their lines of time had been stretched too far. I was left on the street outside, naked and freezing, with no notion where I was."

He smiled feebly at me and then at my wife. "You took me in. I'm grateful—grateful to you." His voice was shaking. He gulped. "Now—"

With a gesture of something like terror, he flung his hand across the table and struck his coffee cup. It shattered on the floor. He ignored it, and sat for half a minute gazing blankly at the stained-glass rose before he shrugged and went on.

"That's what hit me. The moment, I guess, of what Shafique called my psychic trauma." He shuddered and drew a long breath. "Time itself had beaten me. Chen's universe is rigid, dead. He'd found sub-quantum effects that let him stretch the lines of time, but they are anchored in the future as securely as in the past. Displacements correct themselves."

His wild eyes darted at my wife and me, back at the clock.

"And Earth—Earth is gone forever."

He sat there a long time, staring at the clock in blind dejection. He sighed at last, wiped his eyes, and gave us a solemn smile. Life came slowly back into his voice.

"I try to remember what Chen said about that evolutionary leap. I hope his people on New Hope are really a better breed than we were. Perhaps the future is not all black. Earth-type planets may be rare, but perhaps Chen's heirs can go out far enough to find them."

His gaunt face lit for an instant.

"If we could shift perceptions to see the universe whole, as Chen said we should, we might discover a splendid future for mankind." His thin voice quickened. "I see a chance that we can found a magnificent republic of the suns."

Wryly, he shrugged.

"We may even find a safe perpetual power source in the Hawking radiation, but don't bet on it. The future's there, fixed forever, but we won't see it till our turn comes. It's the waiting that makes our lives. *Que sera, sera.*"

He wiped at his lip and blinked at the blood on his finger.

"Or am I still crazy?"

"Shafique says you're sane," my wife assured him.

He gave her a grateful nod and gestured at the clock.

"It brought my life back last night when I heard it striking twelve. What hit me first was the memory of all the years I listened to it, lying awake in bed."

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"Here?" My wife was breathless. "Here?"

"Here." In a dazed way, he shook his head at her and then at me. "I grew up in this house. You are—you will be my father and my mother." He looked hard at her. "Are you—are you pregnant?"

She gasped and nodded.

"With a son?"

Her face gone white, she nodded again.

Shuddering, he turned to me.

"Chen was mistaken," he whispered. "I—not Claudius Zindler—was the vital link he was looking for in the chain of things that killed the Earth. Chen had learned to stretch the lines of time and learned they can't be broken. He found his own way to accept the fact. I was a fool to try."

The old clock whirred and began tolling seven. With a muffled moan, he turned to gaze at it. I heard my wife scream. When I looked back, he was gone. The clothing I'd bought for him lay empty on the floor. I suppose the lines of time had snapped him back to Mars.

Robin's future fate has been hard for my wife to accept. She wanted the stranger's story denied and forgotten, but Shafique insisted that I compile this record of it from his tapes and my own notes and recollections. He believes that it might save the Earth if Robin ever reads it. I am leaving a copy in a bank box rented in his name, though I doubt that the laws of time will ever let him see it.

My wife says we must enjoy him while we can and never let him know who he is to be. ○

THINGS TO DO BEFORE COLD SLEEP

- ☐ Program the autopilot.
- ☐ Knock out the cat.
- ☐ Use the head.
- ☐ Brush your teeth.
- ☐ Set the alarm.
- ☐ Say your prayers.

—G. O. Clark

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ARIEL

Lucius Shepard

Lucius Shepard's latest book, *A Handbook of American Prayer,* is a fantasy short story collection that includes "Only Partly Here" (*Asimov's,* March 2003) and other tales. It will be out sometime this fall from Four Walls Eight Windows. PS Publications will release his original novella, "Trujillo," in the spring.

When I was a younger and more impulsive man, I took a nihilistic delight in the denial of God and the virtues of family, of social and religious virtues of any kind. I believed them to be lies told the ignorant in order to pacify them, and to a great degree I still believe this. I held to the conviction that all life was at heart the expression of an infantile natural fury, that any meaning attributed to it was imposed and not implicit, and that any striving was in essence a refusal to accept the fact of hopelessness. I waved the banner of these views despite exulting in the joys of my young life and seeking to disprove on a personal level the dry, negative philosophies that I publicly espoused. Now, less certain of the world, I have set down that banner and am content with a quiet cynicism, an attitude forced upon me by an event whose nature—though I pretend to understand it—has complicated the world beyond my capacity to absorb. My conception of reality has been enlarged to incorporate an element of predestination, to accept that there is if not a force that controls our lives, then at least a grand design, a template into which all our actions are contrived to fit. Perhaps it is a nihilistic force, perhaps it has a different end. One way or another, we are creatures made of fate.

At the age of nineteen, while a student at Cal Tech, stoned on a quantity of excellent post-Taliban Afghani hash, I jotted down a series of mathematical propositions—fantasies, really—that soon thereafter was turned into breakthrough work by my best friend, Rahul Osauri. Those few minutes of inspired scribbling comprise the sum of my experience of the world of genius, but Rahul, born in India on the Malabar Coast, was a genius every waking moment of his life. He understood what I had merely glimpsed and with my permission, for I perceived no great value in what I had done, he set to work investigating the potentials of my crude conception and not only crafted of it a new model of the universe, but devised engineering applications that enabled the exploration of territories whose existence until that point had been purely speculative. Seven years later he died when the classified project informed by my moment of inspiration was destroyed in an explosion. I was at the time an associate

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professor of history at the University of Michigan (I had dropped my physics major and transferred to UCLA during my junior year in order to pursue a brunette coed with beautiful legs) and ten days after Rahul's death, in early December, I was summoned to a meeting with Patrick Karlan, the head of the department. On entering his office I found two men waiting, neither of them Professor Karlan and both radiating a police vibe, causing me to speculate that the sophomore with whom I'd had an affair the previous semester had spilled the beans. The older of the two, a gray-haired patrician sort wearing pinstripes and a foulard tie, surveyed me with an expression of undisguised distaste, taking in my long hair and jeans and patched car coat. He asked if I was the Richard Cyrus who had attended Cal Tech with Rahul Osauri.

"Dick Cyrus," I said. "Nobody's called me Richard since grammar school."

The gray-haired man stared at me incuriously.

"I hate the name Richard," I went on, growing more nervous by the second and talking in order to conceal it. "It's a kid thing, y'know. There was this quarterback at Georgia. Richard Wycliff. He killed the University of Florida four straight years. I hated the bastard."

"Very well. Dick."

"I asked my dad if I could change my name to Frank," I said, trying to be disingenuously friendly. "Didn't go over too well, so I settled on Dick."

"Excellent choice," said the second man with more than a little sarcasm.

The gray-haired man introduced himself as Paul Capuano and offered credentials that established him as an official with the NSC. He did not bother to introduce the second and younger man, who stood attentive at his shoulder throughout the interview—less an aide, it appeared, than a slim blue-suited accessory—and he cautioned me that everything said would be privy to the Official Secrets Act, briefed me on the penalties I risked should I breach security, and began to question me about my relationship with Rahul and my involvement with his work.

"You've made quite a lot of money as a result of your youthful indiscretions," Capuano said after we had done with the preliminaries.

"I don't consider smoking a bowl of hash that much of an indiscretion," I said. "As for the money, I came up with the basic concept—Rahul thought I should share in any profits resulting from his patents. I never expected there would be any practical applications."

Sitting in Professor Karlan's chair, Capuano studied me coldly from across the desk and I felt a twinge of paranoia. "Something wrong with my having profited?" I asked.

"There's a question as to whether the patents were modified after Osauri began working for the government. Though the devices themselves have nothing to do with the project, it's possible there may be some technical problem with legality."

I understood from this that nothing was wrong with the patents—I was being threatened, and none too subtly.

"What do you want?" I asked. "I don't know anything about your project."

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"That's not altogether true." Capuano removed a folded sheet of paper from the inside pocket of his jacket and read from it: "'I bet I know what you're doing. I imagine the project to be something like an arcade machine. You know, the ones with the toy crane mounted in a plastic cube that you manipulate with a joystick, trying to snag a wristwatch from a heap of cheap pins and rings and combs.'" He glanced up at me. "Recognize it?"

"Yeah. It's an email I sent Rahul. But he never responded. He certainly never said I was right."

"We know that." Capuano's haughty tone suggested that there was little that "we" did not know. "Nevertheless, it demonstrates that you understood what he was up to."

"I was Rahul's friend," I said. "I know what excited him about the idea. It wasn't tough to figure out what he'd try to do. But understand his work? I don't think so. Rahul was on another plane, man. I couldn't even follow his first equations. They might have been magic spells for all I knew."

"We're having the same difficulty. Dr. Osauri left coded notes. But"—his smile was thin as a paper cut—"we'll get it eventually."

"The other scientists on the project . . ."

"All dead. Computer files obliterated. It was a very large explosion." Another smile, as if he found the idea of very large explosions heartwarming.

He picked up a remote from the desktop and switched on Professor Karlan's television, a flat panel screen mounted on a side wall. "We've prepared something for you to watch. I remind you, things will go badly if you reveal one detail of what you're about to see."

An instant later the screen flickered, then displayed a low altitude aerial shot of what looked to be an old bomb crater, its sides scoured clean of vegetation, with a concrete bunker set at the bottom. Atop the bunker was a microwave array. Surrounding this depression was a dense growth of brush and young trees, all lightly dusted with snow.

"This is Tuttle's Hollow in the Alleghenies," said Capuano, pausing the disc. "The lack of vegetation in the hollow is due to a heavy use of microwave radiation. Your friend was using a sophisticated version of your toy crane, a scoop made of bonded particles, to pluck objects from other dimensions."

"Other universes," I said. "At least that was the gist of my idea. That there are an infinite number of universes diverging on the quantum level. Constantly separating and combining."

"Fine . . . universes," Capuano said. "Most of what Osauri brought back were small bits of flora and fauna. They were photographed and then microwaved out of existence to prevent contagion. But to continue your metaphor, one day they snagged the wristwatch."

He fast-forwarded, and the image of a monitor screen appeared; the picture displayed on the screen was a shifting map of fiery many-colored dots, but within them I made out a shape described in faint tracer lines of reddish-orange light. A winged shape with a rounded section atop it.

"We think it's a vehicle," Capuano said.

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"Why would you think that? It could be anything."

He fast-forwarded again. "This is post-explosion. Keep your eye on the bottom of the hollow."

The hollow looked even more like a crater, wisps of smoke rising from every surface. The bunker had vanished. I could see nothing worth notice—then I spotted movement beneath the smoke. Seconds later, a figure leaped from the smoke, landing atop a boulder that projected from the side of the hollow about halfway up. A leap, I'd estimate, of some fifty feet. The figure crouched there a moment. A tall biped, perhaps eight feet and a little more. Anthropomorphic, but incredibly thin. Spidery arms and legs. And, judging by its swelling chest and flaring hips, a female. Either it wore a form-fitting garment of grayish-white material or else that was the color of its skin. Its face was indistinguishable, its hair black and trimmed close to the scalp. In one of its hands was a red pack or case. As I watched it made a second leap that carried it to the rim of the hollow, where it crouched for several seconds more before striding into the brush.

"All right!" I said. "ET!"

"Exactly," said Capuano. "We've combed the area and haven't found a trace of her."

I had a thought. "She might not look the same when you find her."

"Why's that?"

"It's only a hypothesis. But since so much of the idea has proved out, maybe it's worth mentioning."

"Please," Capuano said. "Mention it."

"Ever hear of Springheel Jack?"

He shook his head.

"Springheel Jack was the inspiration for my idea. I can't recall the date when he initially appeared, but it was in Victorian England. People reported seeing an unnaturally tall, thin, deformed figure who could leap over rooftops. Over the years he continued to appear, and the interesting thing is that the reports, instead of getting wilder . . . you know how people exaggerate. Like when somebody sees a UFO? The next day someone else sees ten. Bigger ones. And the next person sees fifty. Well, in Jack's case each subsequent sighting described him as being more and more human and increasingly less capable of superhuman feats. So when Rahul and I were refining my idea, we decided it was likely that all the universes would be strongly anthropic. In other words, the observer creates reality."

"I know what 'anthropic' means," said Capuano with a touch of defensiveness.

"My idea was, these infinite universes . . . the ones closest to us would be almost indistinguishable from our own. Only minor differences. For instance, when you lose something—keys, glasses—you remember putting them on the dresser, but they're not there. It's possible you simply forgot where you put them. What may have happened, because of the endless shuffling of the universes, you may have slipped over into a universe where you left your glasses on the arm of the sofa. You might stay there forever or you might slip back. You'd never know. The universes farther from us, though—they'd start getting strange. One that's very far away would be completely alien."

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Capuano was beginning to look bored. "What's this got to do with Springheel Jack?"

"Let's say Springheel Jack came from a universe pretty far from ours. When he arrived, because of the strongly anthropic nature of reality, our perceptions caused his particulate structure to begin decaying, changing toward something approximating our own, and he grew more and more human. More what we expect. The bubble of reality he generated was being eroded by the strongly anthropic process. That would account for the gradual normalization of his appearance and physical abilities. If he was from a universe too far away, the change he'd have to undergo in order to adapt would be so drastic, he'd die. That would explain a lot of unexplained phenomena. Like the chupacabra. Those mutated goat-things down in Puerto Rico? Rahul and I figured they're from such a far-off universe, they disintegrate. They don't leave a trace. All through history there are reports suggesting this happens frequently. Like in pre-Christian England, there were these two green-skinned children found wandering on the edge of a village. A boy and a girl. The boy died. He couldn't eat the food. The girl was able to eat. She survived. Springheel Jack didn't die . . . at least not right away. Could be he finally normalized. He seemed to be looking for a woman. At least he kept accosting them."

"So," said Capuano. "How long do we have?"

"Before she changes beyond recognition? Years, maybe. But you want to find her quickly. It's not just her shape that's changing, it's her mind. Long before she adapts to our reality—if she does—she'll forget who she is and why she came here. Particle change in the brain. She'll probably regress to the level of a child. She may retain some memories, but they'll seem like dreams."

Capuano punched the remote and brought up the image of the woman crouched on the rim of the hollow.

"Look at her," I said. "Extremely tall and thin. Capable of leaping forty, fifty feet in the air. You might just have Springheel Jill on your hands."

Capuano's aide shifted behind him—his eyes grazed mine and I had the impression that he viewed me in a poor light.

"If you're still hunting for her," I went on, "tell your guys to take particular notice of intense bad smells and feelings of nausea. Those effects would be produced by electron decay when the bubbles of two different realities overlap."

"Okay," Capuano said, drawing out the word.

"Rahul and I really geeked out behind the idea. We figured out all kinds of stuff that synched with it. Like with ghosts. We decided hauntings might be resonance waves from nearby universes."

Capuano made an amused noise. "That must have been some hellacious hash."

"Yeah, it was! Outstanding!"

He continued to question me, but I could tell by his diffident attitude that he had written off his trip to Ann Arbor as a waste of time. He said he would be checking back with me and to give him a call if I thought of anything else. But I never called and he never checked back.

After the interview I headed home to the brunette whom I'd followed to

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UCLA and ultimately married. Her legs were still beautiful, but she had developed an eating disorder, then exchanged this problem for alcoholism, an addiction I was beginning to acquire. We were most of the way down the path to divorce. I decided I should steel myself for a confrontation with her and stopped for a drink at a bar a few blocks from our apartment. The place was decorated for the season with wreaths and merry red and green stickers affixed to the mirror above the liquor bottles. I swilled down a vodka martini, ordered a second, and sat studying the reflections of the other holiday drinkers, their glum expressions similar to my own. My thoughts shifted back and forth between the brunette and the woman in the pit. Seeing her had excited me in a way I had not known since I was a sophomore—her appearance validated the obsessions Rahul and I had shared, our belief that the universe contained miraculous presences unanticipated by mainstream science. I polished off the second martini, signaled the bartender, and was overcome by nostalgia. The good old days at Cal Tech. If I had stayed, what a life I might have had! I was almost to the bottom of a third martini when I realized I was staring at a sticker on the mirror whose outline resembled the image on the monitor screen that Capuano had shown me. The tapering wings partly spread, halo obscuring the shape of the head, making it round. "Some type of vehicle," he had said.

It was a Christmas angel.

It seems I may be both the villain and the hero of this piece, though I am scarcely the stuff from which such figures are traditionally made. My current wife, a smallish woman, has been known to describe me as imposing, but I recognize this for an example of bias on her part. I am an ordinary man of early middle age with a professorial mien who could stand to lose a few pounds. Yet I suppose if my story can be said to have a hero, there is no better candidate for the part, and my actions must be considered villainous to a degree, if for no other reason than that I provided the materials from which everything else derived. When I set foot upon the path that has led to these conclusions, however, I had no stake in the matter whatsoever.

The female figure I saw in Professor Karlan's office never left my mind, though over time it receded, cropping up in my thoughts only intermittently. Then four years after my meeting with Capuano, two years after my divorce became final, I took the fall semester off to research a book. My chief interest as an academic was the cultural usage of myths, their reflection of opposing forces in society. I wanted to particularize Levi-Strauss's work in the area, concentrating on Louisiana, a locale resplendent with myth; but one afternoon in late September a colleague at Tulane told me a story he'd heard from a student, a folktale of recent vintage concerning a dweller in the Allegheny Mountains of West Virginia known as the Willowy Woman. A beautiful woman said to be seven feet tall, a nocturnal creature who lived in the wild and was possessed of immense physical strength and magical powers. I thought of the even taller woman I had seen leap from the hollow and asked my colleague in which part of the Alleghenies the Willowy Woman was purported to live. He consulted

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his notes—she had been seen initially near the town of Valley Head, but thereafter had been sighted by hunters in various other areas. I copied the notes and accessed a map of the state. Valley Head was about twenty miles from Tuttle's Hollow. I referenced a topological map and found that one could follow a system of creeks and streams to Valley Head from a point adjoining the hollow. An excellent escape route for someone fleeing pursuit. The last recorded sighting was south of the town of Durbin, and Durbin was only fifteen miles north of the SETI array at Green Bank.

ET, phone home?

If that had been her original intent, I assumed that she had forgotten it and kept heading for the array on automatic pilot.

I thought about getting in touch with Capuano, but gave it no serious consideration. He had not taken me seriously, and further, if the Willowy Woman proved to be the same woman who had materialized from the project's smoke, I had no desire to turn her over to the bald eagles at the NSC. The notion of meeting the central element of a real-life folktale evoked visions of awards banquets in my head. A book. Books, perhaps. Appearances on national television. Then, too, the notion that this female nightmare who had climbed from the fuming pit might in four years have morphed into a beautiful larger-than-life child-woman living in the deep green mystery of the legend-haunted West Virginia hills, it appealed to my romantic side. I envisioned years spent in study of the woman. Visiting her regularly, gentling her, winning her trust. We would speak to one another in a hybrid language of grunts and whistles and eventually I would emerge from the wood with her on my arm and an incredible story. Even after the toll taken by divorce, I had enough money to chuck my job and live comfortably. To hell with academia! It had been a stopgap, something to do until something better happened along.

And now something had.

The following Saturday afternoon I found myself on a stool in one of Durbin's armpit bars, Mickey's Clubhouse, a place that sported placards in the window advertising HBO, a turkey raffle, and the availability of punchcards, and was full of brownish air and a brimstone smell compounded of industrial-strength cleaner and staleness. Gray light streamed through the dirty front window, but did not penetrate far; the darkness of the clouded mirror was picked out by digital beer ads. I was trying to negotiate with a scrawny, middle-aged man improbably named Whirlie Henley who had been recommended as a guide. Henley was only half-listening. The insignia on his baseball cap and blue windbreaker attested to his allegiance to the West Virginia Mountaineers, and his eyes were pinned to the television set mounted behind the bar which was showing his beloved Mountaineers getting their asses handed them by the University of Miami. It was only after the score reached 38-7 that he turned to me and asked why I wanted to explore the hills south of Durbin.

"Nothin' there 'cept critters and nettles," he said. "A whole big buncha nothin'."

"Humor me," I said.

"I don't know, Professor." He glanced sourly at the TV. "Gets cold out there this time a'year."

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I increased my offer, but Miami was threatening to score again and Henley became even more truculent. His bony face tightened, his watery blue eyes narrowed. "Shit!" he said as a Miami wide receiver danced into the end zone holding the football aloft. He whipped off his Mountaineer cap and eyed it as if it were a thing offensive to God. His drab brown hair was home-cut, trimmed high on the neck, and he had a tonsure-like bald spot.

"Two hundred a day," I said. "Two weeks minimum."

He cocked an eye toward me. "Why you want to pay that much to take a nature walk?"

"The Willowy Woman," I said.

His face emptied. After a moment he called for another beer. The bartender, a huge apple-cheeked man with a bushy beard and black hair falling to his mid-back, wearing a plaid wool shirt and jeans, heaved up from his stool and shambled forward like a hillbilly wrestler cautiously coming out of his corner to confront some masked menace.

"You've seen her," I said after the bartender had mosied back to his perch.

"I seen somethin' mighta been her," Henley took a pull from his beer. "I seen her peepin' at me from a purpleheart tree. Scared the shit outta me."

"What did she look like?"

"Wicked pretty. Long hair. Couldn't see much but her face."

"What happened?"

He had another drink. "I like to fell over. Next I know she shinnied up higher in the tree and I heard her goin' off through the tops of the other trees like she's a monkey." He sucked on his teeth till they squeaked, set the bottle down precisely in the wet circle from which he had lifted it. "Three hunnerd per day and I'll find her for ya."

This surprised me. Going by his expression when I mentioned her, I figured he was still afraid. I said as much and he said, "Oh, yeah. I admit it."

"But three hundred a day will settle your nerves."

"That ain't it." He tipped the bottle to his lips and drank until it was empty, then waved the empty at the bartender, who appeared to have fallen asleep. "Hey, Mickey! Wake your ass up and get me 'nother beer."

The giant lumbered up and lurched toward the cooler. "Goddamn, Whirlie. You be pissin' for a week." He plunked a beer down on the counter. "How 'bout you, friend?" he asked me, his bewhiskered baby face set in earnest lines.

"Well whiskey," I told him. "A double."

"Damn straight!" Mickey said. "I'll join ya."

He poured, we clinked glasses and drank. The whiskey was raw, but Mickey sighed as if in rapture and poured me another on the house before returning to his seat. I fondled the glass but did not drink. I had a presentiment of danger, a sunbreak of rationality in my romantic fog. Immense strength. Magical powers. The capacity to elude an army of searchers. Even four years down the road from the peak of her powers, I had no doubt that the Willowy Woman would be formidable.

"If you're afraid," I said to Henley, "and if it isn't the money that motivates you, how come you want to make the trip?"

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"It's personal," he said. "Once't you seen that face, it's kinda like you gotta see it agin."

The hills south of Durbin were thickly forested with medleys of butternut, black walnut, tupelos, oaks, tulip trees, and here and there a chestnut stump. The skies were overcast and even at noon it was dark under the trees. Whenever the sun peeked through, the twisted trunks cast devious shadows. The forest floor was carpeted with rotting leaves and ground apple, ginseng and goldenseal. Mica-flecked boulders poked out from the slopes. We backpacked for three days before Henley detected signs that the Willowy Woman might be in the area: rabbit bones that bore the marks of human teeth and human waste less than a day old. Another two days of reconnoitering and he claimed to have established the perimeters of her hunting ground.

"She'll been comin' through the treetops," he said. "She prob'ly lives in 'em. I ain't seen one footprint . . . though I know she's bound to come down once't in a while. We gonna sight 'er, we gotta get in the trees ourselves." He spat and adjusted his Mountaineer cap. "We gon' hafta be damn lucky any way you cut it. I figger she's got night eyes."

So it was that we spent the next three nights high in the crown of a water oak, keeping watch in nearly total darkness, staring down through the wends of branches and masses of leaves, alert for any glimmer of movement. On the fourth day I told Henley I thought we should change our position. I was giddy with lack of sleep, sore from bracing in the fork of a limb, and I was looking to gain an advantage over weariness and boredom—I hoped a new vantage might help to keep me awake and give us a better shot at encountering the Willowy Woman. Henley was lukewarm to the idea.

"Well, we could," he said, scratching his neck. "But way I figger, she's a mover. She hunts an area one night, then moves on. We might be due for a visit, we stick it out here."

"How do you know she's a mover?" I asked, irritated—Henley's woods lore had gotten us nowhere and I thought my voice deserved to be heeded.

"I don't know nothin'. I jus' figger that's how it is. I got a good feelin' we hang around here, she'll come to us. But it's your dollar."

I was, I discovered, not up to shouldering the burden of decision. Or maybe I just wanted Henley to be the one who was wrong—I was losing hope that we would find her. The sky cleared that evening; the stars shone bright and there was a three-quarter moon. Aloft in the water oak, wired on caffeine pills, I felt afloat, grounded in silvery light. The points of the leaves were tipped with illusory glitters—they seemed to hiss when they touched my skin. I wished I had a joint to smooth things out, though I doubted Henley would approve. I made him out below to the right, half-hidden among the shadowy foliage. Still as an Indian. Likely replaying old Mountaineer games in his head, or boning up on his botanical knowledge. Every time we passed a plant he'd say its name, as if I cared. "That there's black kohosh," he'd say. "And that's cardinal flower . . . that little 'un next to the crust of fungus." I told myself to lighten up on Whirlie.

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He'd proved to be a good traveling companion. He put up with my bullshit, after all, and he told amusing stories about his life in the redneck paradise. Turned out he had a sister by the name of Girlie. Whirlie and Girlie Henley.

"She come out a few months premature," he'd said. "Daddy was gonna call her Early, but mama wouldn't have it."

I zoned out for a while, lost in the stars. Tiny sparkles against the black. A cold breeze made me shiver, bringing a bitter scent. I began to feel queasy and wondered if the game I'd eaten was backing up on me. I was too self-absorbed to recognize these for signs of the Willowy Woman's presence and the first I knew she was nearby was when I heard Henley squawk, this followed by a thud from below. I peered down, trying to see him.

"Hey. . . . What's going on?" I asked shakily.

Then I spotted her peeking from among the leaves to my left. Henley had been right about her face. Milk-pale, long and narrow, it had an exotic angularity and simplicity such as might be depicted in a comic book artist's vision of beauty, too streamlined to be real, and it was more compelling than the face of any human woman I had known. Her eyes were dark, almost no whites showing around enormous pupils, and the eyebrows were black upswept streaks. Sharp cheekbones mimicked the angle of her eyebrows; her mouth was wide and full, predatory yet sensual. The face of an avenging angel such as might have been drawn by Neal Adams or Jim Steranko. But real, vibrant, almost hallucinatorily intense. She emerged further from the leaves, snarled black hair waterfalling to her waist, and stared at me as if I were the one thing in the world that mattered.

Nausea roiled the contents of my stomach and a fierce rotting stench clotted my nostrils, but I remained transfixed by her. The descriptions given in my colleague's notes all spoke of her as naked, but she wore a faded oversized dress and a down jacket patched with strips of duct tape—castaways she must have scavenged from a dump. She seized hold of my shirt and lifted me . . . but not easily. Her arm trembled with the effort. Nonetheless, she lifted me and I was certain she was going to drop me from the tree, just as I assumed she had done with Henley. But then her intense expression was washed away by one of confusion. Her eyes widened, her lips parted, and she let out a gasp. She wrapped an arm about my waist and began to descend through the tree, carrying me like a sack of flour. Disoriented, the leaves slapping me in the face, shots of moonlight splashing into my eyes, I struggled against her grip, but she held me fast. Once we reached the ground she deposited me at the base of the trunk and stalked off several paces, moving with a gliding step. I realized that she was nowhere near seven feet tall. Closer to six, I'd say. Then I recalled that it had been some time since the last sighting. She had dwindled and grown weaker since that night.

She paced back and forth, making a humming noise. I had no reason to believe I would survive the encounter, but I was not as frightened as I might have expected and thus was able to appreciate the sight of this lovely woman half-cloaked in black hair, the statuesque lines of her body visi-

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ble through the thin material of her dress, gliding with an oddly smooth gait over the moon-dappled forest floor. Not even the funky clothes detracted from her air of otherworldliness. I had the notion she had forgotten about me and was lost in some mental labyrinth, trying to come to terms with a terrible frustration—I recalled hiding in the brush, watching a wolf drink from a stream in the Alaskan wilderness, watching a drunken old woman on the fringes of Carnival in Bahia, lifting her arms to the moon as if pleading for one last grand frivolity, and other glimpses of the kind, those sudden, small observances that hold in our minds and seem to sustain the rest of life, as if life were a tapestry, mostly dark and dingy, and they were the bright pins it was stretched between. It was like that watching the Willowy Woman, sitting dazed beneath the water oak that night, lost in the witchy West Virginia woods.

I heard a moan from the shadows on the opposite side of the trunk: Henley. The woman broke off her pacing and turned toward the sound; then, apparently not caring that Henley was alive, she came over to me, dropped to a knee, and leaned close, her face inches away. She said something. A name, I thought, for she tapped her chest before she spoke. "Ahhh-ell," she said, and waited for a response; but I was incapable of speech, not—as I've said—afraid, but transfixed, overpowered by the intensity that streamed from her like rippling heat. She repeated the word, breathing it harshly, a windy growl, and when again I failed to respond, she whirled up to her feet and strode away, her hands clasped behind her neck. Her fingers, I saw, were disproportionate in length to the rest of her hand, less affected by the transformation. Each finger had an extra joint.

Henley groaned a second time and when the woman did not react, I crawled over to where he lay, crumpled in a slant of moonlight, his Mountaineer cap lying on the ground by his hand. I asked if he was all right. His eyelids fluttered and he said, "Hell no!" His breath caught; he winced. "My left leg . . . I think it's broke."

Using the hunting knife strapped to his belt, I ripped his trouser leg. His knee was swollen, but not discolored. "Might be a sprain," I said.

"It's a bad 'un if it is," he said.

He winced again, clamped his hands to his ears, and at the same instant I felt a vibration inside my skull and heard a thin keening, as from an electronic whistle. The pain that followed pitched me onto my side. Through slitted eyes I saw the woman standing about fifteen feet away, her mouth wide open, neck corded, gazing into the forest. From off in the dark there came an agonized squealing; a second or two later a wild boar, a bristly little black tank, trotted into view, shaking its head wildly. It made a staggering charge toward the woman, then toppled over onto its side, its legs trembling, and soon lay still. The keening stopped, the woman stepped to the boar, squatted and began wrenching at one of the hind legs. It took her a great deal of effort, but finally she managed to rip off the entire haunch. She shouldered the remainder of the boar, picked up the bloody haunch in her right hand. She walked over to where I was sitting and dropped the fresh meat on the ground in front of me. Sadness came into her face. She put her hand, fingers spread, on her chest and, nailing me with those huge dark eyes, said again, "Ahhh-ell."

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I was certain now that she was telling me her name, but I was too frightened to answer.

She stood looking at me another ten, fifteen seconds. It was if she had turned up her intensity—I could have sworn I felt the specific values of her feelings. Sadness. Frustration. But these were merely elements of a more intricate emotion I could not put a name to. I wanted to say something to bind her there, but I remained afraid of her strength, her killing voice. She leaped up onto the trunk of the water oak, clung one-handed, then scooted out of sight among the leaves. I heard the crown thrashing and thought I heard a rustling thereafter in an adjoining tree.

"She's gone from here," said Henley, sitting up. He'd donned his Mountaineers cap and looked more together than he had. I asked what reason he had for believing she was gone and he said, "Just a feelin' I got. She gonna be findin' herself a new home."

I'd received no such impression, though it was possible it had been buried in among all the other impressions I had received.

"Gone suits me fine," Henley said. "I seen her twice't now and twice't is all I need."

An owl hooted twice, a hollow trill that seemed to cause a general stirring of the leaves, and the moon hovered in the crotch of a forked branch, like a misshapen silver stone held in the thong of a slingshot, aimed at my face.

"I doubt twice will do it for me," I said.

I shepherded Henley to the highway, where we hitched a ride back to Durbin, and then I returned to the water oak, where I waited almost a week. The woman did not reappear and I realized Henley had been correct in his impression—she was gone and would not return to the area. I hired a sketch artist and worked with him until he produced an accurate likeness of the woman, and had the sketch made into posters and distributed them throughout the western part of the state, offering a reward for information regarding her whereabouts and listing a phone number in Green Bank, where I'd rented a house. I received a number of responses, none helpful, and I expanded my search area to include other parts of the state. I resigned my teaching position and moved full-time into a larger house, spending most of my time tracking down leads.

I could not have explained the grounds for my obsession, except to say that Rahul and I were fascinated by the possibility of the miraculous, committed to unearthing some spectacular truth from beneath the common soil of what appeared a masterless universe in which randomness and order were equally blended, holding one another in perfect yet accidental suspension. That fascination had been the glue of our friendship and I had abandoned it, while Rahul never strayed. Perhaps guilt relating to this abandonment spurred me on. That, at least, is what I would have told you. I understand now there was another reason underlying it, one I would have considered insane at the time; and I am certain that the nature of obsession itself was in play. We are all of us obsessed by things that magnify the facet of our capabilities we are least certain of and that allow us to fully inhabit a persona we wish to assume. I had fallen in love

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with the moment during which I scribbled down the idea that Rahul's genius had fleshed out. Confronted with the Willowy Woman, the byproduct of that moment, I'd felt the same rush and I wanted it to continue. Searching for her was my only means of effecting this.

Obsession, however, offers no guarantees. For nearly five years I had no real news of her. I spent some of that time qualifying myself to be licensed as a private investigator—I presumed I was in for a long search and I believed that the training and perks attaching to the license might come in handy. I also managed to write a novel about the Willowy Woman, omitting all mention of Rahul's project. I had no wish to incur the wrath of the NSC. The novel achieved a modest success, enough to demand a second book, and I was in the midst of researching it when I received a phone call from a devotee at the Hare Krishna center in Moundsvillle, West Virginia. The caller, one Ravinda, informed me that a woman who resembled the sketch on my posters had come to the temple fifteen months previously. She had been unable to read or write, barely able to speak, but had exhibited a remarkable ability to learn. Within a year she had acquired the skills necessary to enable her to leave. Ravinda had not had much conversation with her, but said he would be happy to introduce me to her mentor.

"How tall was she?" I asked.

"About average." Ravinda paused. "She was very beautiful. Some of the women accused her of being wanton. Of course, they only accused her because Shivananda told them to." He said this last in a conspiratorial tone, as if indulging in gossip.

"Wow," I said. "Wanton, huh?"

"She angered many devotees . . . especially when she refused to accept her new name. She preferred her own."

"What was it?"

"Guruja."

"I mean the name she liked."

"Ariel," Ravinda said.

Driving from the Mountain Dew Motel in Moundsville to meet Ravinda, my thoughts resonated with the similarity between the names: Ariel and Ahhh-ell. The Willowy Woman might be having trouble with her Rs, or perhaps Ahhh-ell was her universe's equivalent of Ariel. If nothing else this ratified my belief that she had been telling me her name and I tried, as I had many times over the years, to understand why she had not treated me like she had Henley. The conclusion I previously had reached was that she mistook me for someone, but I could never buy this explanation. Looking as she did, where would she have met anyone who resembled me?

The Hare Krishnas are the Southern Baptists of Hinduism and like their American counterparts, they delight in opulent temples. The centerpiece of the Moundsville Krishna colony was Prahubada's Palace of Gold, purportedly an example of the architecture of classical India. If this was, indeed, the case, classical India must have looked a lot like Las Vegas. The palace was gaudy, covered with gold leaf, and seemed very much

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a place where you could lose all your money. As I ascended the winding road toward the temple, the golden dome rising above a green hill had a surreal aspect—it might have been an art construction by Christo or some other conceptualist, a shiny yellow ball of immense proportions dropped in the middle of nowhere. Seen straight on, the building possessed a certain rococo delicacy, but its good qualities were diminished by the orange-robed lotus eaters flocking the grounds, all sporting Krishna-conscious smiles and offering repulsively cheerful greetings as I passed by.

Ravinda turned out to be a Jewish kid from Brooklyn Heights whose shaved head and monkish attire did little to disguise his heritage. He led me across the lawn to a shade tree beneath which a paunchy fiftyish man, also clad in orange robes, a smudge of red powder centering his brow, sat cross-legged on a prayer rug. His flesh was pasty, soft, and his brow was creased by the Three Sacred Wrinkles. His heavy-lidded eyes looked like walnut halves stuck in an unbaked cookie. His demeanor conveyed an oafish tranquility. This, Ravinda said, was Shivananda.

"What's up?" I asked Shivananda, just on the chance he might know the answer.

With a forlorn look I attributed to his having been summoned back to the world from Fifth Dimension Avenue, he inclined his head and said, "You are welcome here."

Ravinda withdrew to a discreet distance and Shivananda asked why I was interested in Guruja. I was fully prepared for the question. I offered my P.I. credentials and handed him a forged letter from imaginary parents asking one and all to cooperate with their agent, myself, in discovering what had happened to their little sweetheart, Ariel, missing now for lo these many years.

"She left us two months ago," Shivananda said. "I advised against it, but she refused to listen."

"Know where she went?"

"California. But where exactly . . ." He spread his hands in a helpless gesture, head tilted, eyebrows raised. "We have a box of her possessions. You are welcome to take them . . . for the parents. Ravinda will fetch them for you."

"What can you tell me about her?"

"She was of God," Shivananda said. "She came to us empty and we sought to fill her with blessings."

There was an oiliness in his voice that led me to suspect the metaphor, to wonder what sort of blessing he had sought to fill her with. He shook his head ruefully and went on: "But her nature . . . she was not suitable. Not a seeker."

"She was wanton?" I suggested.

He glanced sharply at me.

"She had some trouble along those lines before she ran away," I said. "You know . . . boy-crazy."

"She was a very sexual being." Shivananda gave the word "sexual" a dainty presentation. "But I believe she has a special purpose in the world. One day she will return to us."

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In your dreams, Lardboy, I said to myself. I agreed with Henley—Ariel was a mover. I believed she was still trying to head toward the destination from which the project had diverted her, unaware of why she was going there.

I talked to Shivananda for half an hour. He had little salient to tell me; everything he said bore a taint of petulant regret. I had a sense that he had been more than a mentor, that he had been smitten by Ariel, hauled back into the world of illusion and desire. I pictured the novice Krishnas giggling and singing, "Shivananda and Guruja sittin' in a tree. . . ." The one bit of information that intrigued me was that Ariel had done some writing while she was at the center. I asked what sort of writing.

"Frivolous," he said. "Worthless fantasies." He pursed his lips as if able to taste their worthlessness.

I wished him happy dharma and went with Ravinda to collect Ariel's possessions, which had been loaded into a cardboard file holder. This afforded me a quick tour of the palace. Peacock vanes in brass urns. Sandalwood incense. Sumptuous rooms with silk pillows for reclining. Every surface inlaid and filigreed. I'll say this for the Krishnas—as interior decorators they wallowed in style.

On returning to my motel I opened the file holder. Resting atop the pile within was a neatly folded dress. Not the same dress the Willowy Woman had worn on the night I saw her, but of the same quality. Torn and faded. A relic. I assumed it to be the one she had worn on her arrival in Moundsville. Beneath the dress was a wooden box containing a necklace of squirrel bones and slightly more than fourteen dollars in bills and change. Lying beneath the box was a photograph of three men—Ravinda among them—and two young women in orange robes. Only one of the women had hair. Long black hair falling to her waist.

Ariel.

The face was no longer so perfect in its symmetry, so uncomplicated in its beauty—it bore marks of usage, marks of character—but it was the same face I had seen in among the leaves of the water oak. I estimated her to be no more than five feet five—she was shorter than Ravinda, who was no giant. She was diminished, made human, but she retained her intensity. Standing with the others, she was an Arabian among Shetland ponies, a star with her supporting cast.

The photograph had been resting atop a pile of manila folders. Several contained drawings, mostly nature studies; but there were a few at variance with the rest, all renderings of a grotesque male face, extremely narrow and long, with a flattened nose similar to a baboon's and striations on the cheeks like ritual scarifications. Though I had no evidence as to when each of these drawings had been done, I suspected that the most fully realized had been drawn early in her stay at the colony, and that she had gradually become less sure of her memory. I believed, you see, this might be a face from her life prior to the destruction of the project—I had not seen her face in Capuano's video, but her head had been similar in shape to the one depicted in the drawings.

Three folders held samples of her writing. Some of it appeared to be notes for a story concerning . . . well, I wasn't sure what it concerned, as

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the notes were not only incoherent and fragmentary, but written in a mixture of English and ideographs that an uninformed observer might have taken for a personal shorthand, but that I assumed were elements of an alien alphabet. From what I could determine the plot involved a man and a woman who had a rather tempestuous relationship that came to compromise their duties—what those duties entailed was unclear.

Despite having established that Ariel was the Willowy Woman, I was disappointed that the contents of the box had not revealed more. I sat up all that night reviewing the folders, hoping to discover some further hint as to her past or present, but to no avail. The following morning, drinking coffee in the Mountain Dew's restaurant, I thought of a question I had not asked. The fourteen dollars and change bothered me. Ariel could not have had much money—fourteen dollars would have been significant to her. How could she have afforded to leave the Krishnas? I assumed that she had not returned to the wild, that her progress in this universe would continue to be upwardly mobile. Certainly she was brave enough to have set out with no money, but according to Ravinda she had left suddenly, motivated by no inciting incident, and didn't this speak to the likelihood of a windfall?

As a private investigator I was a competent history professor. Had my instincts been more professionally acute, I might have taken certain actions that would have cut years off my search. But as it happened I felt myself at a dead end. The only clue to Ariel's whereabouts was Shivananda's assertion that she had gone to California and I could not be sure that she had been forthcoming with him. Even if she were there, what chance did I have of finding her among the millions of women in California? I had wasted five years in this pursuit and the realization that I might waste years more suddenly seemed irreconcilable with my need to have a life. Over the next few days, as I explored the logistics of moving to California, the allure of doing so began to dim. My best hope of finding Ariel had been to track her down before she left the state. Now she was gone, she might be anywhere. For more than a week I put my plans on hold and deliberated about my future. I had no family, no friends, nothing approaching a love life. All I had to build on was my publishing contract . . . but did I truly want to be a writer? I began fiddling with the second book and to my surprise, over the span of another week I wrote sixty pages. Without admitting to myself that I wasn't going to move, I worked from early morning until dinnertime each day. Two months along in the process I decided to stay in West Virginia until the book was finished.

I came to dwell less and less on Ariel, immersed both in a new career and a relationship with a local high school teacher. I came to think of West Virginia as my home. But two and a half years later, while doing research on the net for my fourth book, I pulled up a web page that—though it didn't shatter the comfortable niche I had carved for myself—caused me to understand that my obsession had been dormant, not dead. In conceptualizing the book I had decided to put my first three books in historical context and do a fictional treatment of Springheel Jack, tying him in with the story of the Willowy Woman. I'd been inspired in this by my long-ago suggestion that Ariel might be Springheel Jill, and my plot

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was to involve a bond between Ariel and Jack, a shared purpose that ultimately cast the two characters adrift in the multiverse. I had not expected to find anything to support this fanciful proposition, but the website I accessed contained several sketches of Jack done by nineteenth-century newspaper artists and one bore an amazing similarity to the elongated face that Ariel had sketched at the Krishna temple. Though the face in Ariel's sketch was considerably more deviant from the human than those in the newspapers, I had little doubt they were all attempts at depicting the same creature. This discovery, while shocking, did not entirely rekindle my obsession. Ariel was still lost in California and the evidence of a possible link between her and Springheel Jack did not make the task of finding her any easier. But if only in terms of the book, I began to think about her again, to wonder what she might be doing and what the strange creature she once was had intended.

In November of the following year, after I had finished the book, my agent, Jannine Firpo, persuaded me to travel to New York City. There was to be a party at the Algonquin Hotel, an annual affair attended by large numbers of writers and editors. Jannine thought it might be beneficial to my career if I were to mingle with my peers. I was not thrilled by the prospect. On the other hand I was tempted by the thought of eating in decent restaurants and listening to music more sophisticated than roadhouse country and western.

The party proved to be a cattle call. Hundreds of people, most of them middle-aged men, jammed into a conference room outfitted with a bar. Abandoned by Jannine, I found myself pinned against a wall, trapped in a conversation dominated by a strident, adipose woman with a fruity voice and wearing what appeared to be a maroon pup tent. Eventually I escaped to the bar, where I threw down a couple of vodkas. I was considering seeking a more convivial atmosphere in which to do my drinking, when—feeling someone brush my elbow—I glanced down and saw Ariel beside me.

Dressed in a blue silk blouse and tight cream-colored skirt; black hair loose about her shoulders; the fine shape of her mouth redrawn in crimson; she was a foot shorter than when I had last seen her, her figure far more voluptuous. Her beauty had a concentrated quality, as if her vitality, too, had been compressed and was now barely contained within her body. Like a star grown more radiant as it collapsed. She asked the bartender for a glass of port, pronouncing the word "pawt," then noticed me staring and, with a puzzled look, asked, "Do I know you?"

Hearing her speak startled me as much as it had when she had spoken in the woods years before, but I managed to get out, "I was wondering the same thing. I'm Dick Cyrus."

"Ariel."

Again she glossed over the R. Back in West Virginia I had not been able to determine the color of her eyes—now I saw they were dark brown, the irises almost indistinguishable from the pupils. Curiosity neutralized my sense of tact and I asked what her surname was.

She made a sad mouth. "I'm using Lang, but actually I don't remember my name. I'm an amnesiac."

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She went on to tell me that over a period of days she had gradually wakened to the world and realized that she was lost in the woods. Disoriented, unable to speak coherently, she had wandered out to a highway, where she was given a ride by a man who shortly thereafter tried to rape her. After dealing with him, she made her way to Moundsville and there had been attracted to the golden dome of the Krishna center.

"I'm from West Virginia myself," I said.

"That explains why you look so familiar. I must have seen you down there."

"It's possible."

"I don't suppose you remember seeing me?"

I understood that she hoped I might have knowledge about her past, but I had no intention of telling her anything—I was afraid she would think me insane. I said I was sorry, but I couldn't recall having met her before, and asked what she was doing at the party.

"My agent thought I should be here," she said. "My first novel's just come out."

I offered congratulations and, remembering the fragments of writing that I'd read in Moundsville, I asked if she had wrtten anything previously.

"I supported myself for a while doing short stories, but the science fiction magazines don't pay much."

Enough, I supposed, to allow her to leave the Krishna center. I castigated myself for not having thought of this possibility.

We had been talking for no more than a few minutes when Jannine materialized from the crowd and said, "There you two are! I was hoping I'd have a chance to introduce you, and here you've done it on your own!" A trim and manically energetic woman in her early fifties, she beamed at us with maternal approval. "You have to read Ariel's novel," she said to me, digging in her voluminous tote bag. "It has amazing similarities to your new book." She pressed a book wrapped in a garish dust jacket into my hand, then took Ariel's arm and guided her away, saying there was someone who wanted to meet her.

The novel was entitled *The Atonement* and was the first volume of a trilogy. The cover illustration was of a metal sarcophagus cut away to reveal a black-haired woman within, eyes closed, arms crossed upon her breast. A white radiance streamed from the sarcophagus, almost obscuring it, but I could see enough to tell that it was similar in shape to that of the fiery image I had seen in Professor Karlan's office, the image that appeared on the monitor prior to the explosion that had destroyed Rahul's project. This further validation of what I knew did not thrill me as I might have thought. I was taken with her on a personal level, reacting like a man in the grip of an attraction. I did not want her to have a connection with the creature who leaped from the crater where my best friend had died.

Two hours later, sitting in the dim seclusion of the Algonquin bar, having read a hundred and some pages of *The Atonement,* it had become clear that what Ariel had written was her story. Doubtless certain details of the novel, its terminology, names, and so forth, were inexact, but I was

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convinced that the characters and core events were at least reflections of the real and that though she could not recall her past, the past was streaming up from her subconscious. The most astonishing thing was that her conception of the cosmos was basically the same as the one I had sketched out back at Cal Tech, an infinite number of anthropic universes shuffling and reshuffling, combining on a quantum level. The heroine, Ah'raelle, and her lover, Isha, were soldiers, respectively commander and subordinate, in what was less a war than a trans-universal game of chess. Encased in metal pods designed to shield them from the deleterious stresses of other realities, they traveled on missions to various universes in an effort to maintain the structure of the continuum, which they called the Weave, protecting it against another army of equally advanced soldiers who sought to subvert the grand design and so reconfigure the essential purpose of creation. The pods shed a blinding white radiance and were frequently mistaken for heavenly creatures by the indigenes of the universes they visited. The force in which Ah'raelle and Isha served was referred to as the Akashel, and the force against whom they contended was called the Ahkitai. Both forces were led by groups of enlightened men and women who combined the qualities of scientists and mystics, and were in touch with the entities who presided over the cosmos. Not gods, but warlords who dwelled on some incomprehensible plane. Complicating the game played by the Akashel and the Akhitai was the fact that whenever a soldier set forth on a mission from, let's say, Universe A, there was a buckshot effect and similar missions would be launched from neighboring universes, involving analogues of the soldiers who had been sent from Universe A. Thus there were vast numbers of missions always in progress, and the pods were in essence shuttles weaving back and forth across an infinite loom, one side seeking to repair the damage the other had wrought. If I had come to the book as a casual reader I would have quickly discarded it. Ariel was not a brilliant stylist and her plot exploited one of the most overused of literary tropes, that of men employed in the service of either gods or some cosmic purpose; but though my critical instincts declared that her book was a tedious fantasy with a treacly dose of New Age mysticism, a kind of softcore religious screed leavened with lengthy passages of sex and violence, I was convinced that it embodied a record of her life and I read on.

A conflict arose between Isha and Ah'raelle, one having to do with trust. Isha, in an attempt to protect her, kept information from her relating to a mission. She believed he was trying to manipulate her and that he had gone over to the Akhitai. Nothing Isha said or did could persuade her that he was loyal. Unable to repair the relationship, he became distraught, distracted, and—eventually—deranged. The love he had felt for Ah'raelle changed to bitterness and hatred, and he became a rogue, traveling across the multiverse, seeking out her analogues in other realities. The reasons for his actions were left unclear—but whether vengeful or trying to establish a relationship with another Ah'raelle, he succeeded in wreaking havoc with the Weave, and Ah'raelle was punished by being sent on to kill Isha.

Thus ended the first volume of the Akashel Trilogy.

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My mind thronged by suppositions, I returned to my room and saw the message light blinking on the phone. I had two messages, both from Ariel. The first went as follows:

"This is Ariel . . . from the party. Sorry to call so late, but I wonder if you're free for lunch tomorrow. I've been reading *The Willowy Woman* and I have some questions. About the book. Uhm . . . I . . . If we miss each other for lunch, I'll be in the city a few more days. I'm in the hotel, too." A pause. "Room Five Twenty-Three." Another, longer pause. "I'll talk to you later, I hope."

Then the second message:

"If we don't connect, I'll be in the coffee shop tomorrow at noon. Good night."

I fell asleep the second I hit the bed and waked thinking about Ariel in a less than clinical way. After showering, though it was only eleven, too anxious to sit in the room, I went down to the coffee shop and ordered a diet Pepsi. I had been there nearly three-quarters of an hour when a slight gray-haired man with a hunted look stopped by my booth and said in what seemed an accusatory tone, "Dick Cyrus." Without bothering to introduce himself, he went on, "Your work is interesting, but I find your use of flashbacks annoying."

After discarding several more aggressive replies, I said, "Bite me."

He gave me a bitter stare and scurried off, doubtless seeking someone else to reprimand. Shortly thereafter Ariel entered the restaurant, wearing jeans and a white turtleneck sweater. She slid into the seat across from me and said, "I'm glad you could make it." She appeared to be as nervous as I was. Ducking her eyes, fidgeting with her silverware. Her fingers were disproportionately long, but there was no extra joint.

A waitress came to hover. Ariel ordered eggs, bacon, and an extra side of bacon. Did her metabolism run higher than the norm?

"That's eight pieces of bacon, ma'am," the waitress warned.

Ariel thought it over. "I'd like a stack of pancakes, too." We made small talk while waiting for the food, telling stories about Jannine, discussing our lives—she rented a cabin in the hills near Arcata in northern California—and holding a post-mortem on the party, a topic upon which we were of one mind. Once we had eaten I asked what questions she had about *The Willowy Woman*.

"This is going to sound strange," she said. "But I have dreams about a woman who resembles the one in your book. The jacket notes said you believe the legend is true."

"I saw her," I said. "I know it's true."

"In West Virginia? Where exactly?"

"Over near Durbin, the northwestern part of the state."

"Oh," she said glumly.

"It was a long time ago and she hasn't been spotted in the area since. She may have moved closer to Moundsville, if that's what you were thinking."

She nodded. "I was thinking that."

I fielded her questions as best I could, hampered in this by not wanting to reveal what I knew. We exhausted the topic and she turned the conver-

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sation to my new book. Our mutual agent had given her to understand that our fictive conceptions of the universe were almost identical. I told her about my moment of inspiration, about Rahul, but not about the project.

"I feel almost no connection with most people," she said after a considerable silence. "I'm not sure why. Maybe a lack of trust due to my memory. But I feel a strong connection with you. Perhaps it's because I've seen you before, but . . ." She drew a breath, as if summoning strength. "I don't know what your plans are, but I'm going to be in New York five more days. If you're agreeable, I'd enjoy spending some time with you."

I tried not to appear overeager. "I'd like that, too.'"

"Why? I mean . . . I wonder what you're feeling."

"I'd characterize it as an attraction," I said.

A kid in a Fangoria T-shirt chose the moment to approach and ask me for an autograph. Ariel snapped at him, "Wait till we're done!" The kid slunk away. I looked at her in surprise. Her outburst had embodied an offhanded imperiousness that enlarged my appreciation of her character. This one, I told myself, was accustomed to giving orders.

"I hate being interrupted." She turned back to me, still in command mode. "Go on."

"I was finished."

She gave me a hard stare. I couldn't decide if she was judging me or trying to figure me out. When she spoke there was no trace of the seductive in her voice, but rather a steely perfunctoriness. "We'll have to see what develops, won't we?" she said.

I was, as I've stated, in love with the moment when I came up with the propositions that inspired Rahul, and I had been obsessed with the Willowy Woman. Therefore it did not come as a shock when I recognized that obsession had turned to love. In the space of three days my feelings for Ariel intensified dramatically, but even during the initial rush of desire and longing, I worried about her. If I were to accept that *The Atonement* was a record of her life before her arrival in West Virginia; if she had been hunting a deranged ex-lover across the multiverse and he was still hunting her; if the resemblance of her drawing to nineteenth-century newspaper sketches of Springheel Jack was not merely a coincidence; then I had to accept as well that she was in danger. The novel answered my old questions. Where had she been heading when the project scooped her up? What was her directive? I believed now that she was on her way to a rendezvous with the man she called Isha, perhaps intending to kill him, and that the original Springheel Jack had been another Isha. It was the differences between the drawings, the distinctions between the features, that most persuaded me of this. If the original Jack had launched himself from Universe A and wound up in nineteenth-century England on our earth (Earth X), then it was not difficult to imagine that other Jacks had set forth from other universes (the buckshot effect in action) and that one of them was due to end up on Earth X nearly two centuries later, and that this second Jack, because of his variant origins, would resemble but not be identical to his analogue. I assumed that Ah'raelle had been headed

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for California, to a point in a time when Isha was destined to appear. Now, her memory obliterated, driven by instinct, she had traveled to the rendezvous point and was waiting for him, incapable either of anticipating his advent or of defending herself.

Ariel's character, too, helped convince me that the situation was as I perceived it. Though she was sweet, gentle, affectionate, there was in her a core of harsher attitudes. In an instant she could become sharply focused or impatient or demanding, and these moods seemed not casual expressions of her personality, but purely utilitarian, brought into play when she needed them. In her hotel room were dozens of notebooks filled with tiny, cramped printing. A new novel, I supposed. But she told me it was the outline for book two of her trilogy, which she had just completed—nearly every moment of the narrative laid out with scrupulous precision. The woman was unnaturally organized. I began to think that her sweetness might be a product of this world, an overlay that masked the strict behaviors she had learned in another. She approached being in love—and she obviously was coming to love me—with a pragmatic single-mindedness, as if it were a discipline to be mastered. Nothing that impeded this mastery was gladly tolerated. A case in point: on our fourth evening together we were on her bed, partially clothed, when I realized I could not go forward until I told her everything. Though worried she might react badly, I was more concerned about what might happen if I withheld the information—the fate of Isha in her book stood as a cautionary parable. When I said I needed to talk to her before things went further, she grew angry.

"Isn't this what you want?" she asked. "You can leave if you're having second thoughts."

"Of course it's what I want. But . . ."

"You don't have some sort of disease, do you? If not, I don't understand what could be so important."

"I saw you once before you came to Moundsville."

She was a silent for a beat, then said, "That can wait."

"No, I need to tell you about it now."

"I'm telling you it's not important!"

"I want you to trust me. I have your novel as evidence of what trust means to you in a relationship."

"What's my novel have to do with anything?"

"If you'll listen I'll explain."

She disengaged from me, sat up cross-legged, but did not rebutton her blouse. "Go ahead."

"It may be difficult for you to hear this. I . . ."

"Just tell me! It's not necessary to qualify what you say."

And so I told her. Everything. From my stoner moment at Cal Tech to our meeting in the hills outside of Durbin to my latest thoughts concerning Springheel Jack and my hypothesis that she might soon be receiving a visitor who resembled him. She neither moved nor commented while I spoke. Once I had finished she asked why I hadn't told her previously.

"I wasn't sure you'd believe me. I didn't want to trip you out." A few seconds ran off the clock and I asked, "Do you believe me?"

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"I believe you believe it."

"But I might be crazy, huh?"

"That's not a judgment I can make so quickly. But I'm of a mind to think you're sane." Her eyes drifted toward the stack of notebooks on the nightstand. "What you said about the project and the crash. Ah'raelle's transformation. Her memory loss and Isha tracking her down to California. It's the plot of my second book. I thought I'd dreamed it." She relaxed from her rigorous pose and settled beside me, laid a hand on my cheek, suddenly ultra-feminine, holding me with her eyes. "Let's not think about it. I'll deal with it later."

"How can you not think about it? Jesus! If somebody told me what I just told you, I'd . . ."

"The future can wait, but the present cannot wait." A smile came slowly to her lips. "If I'm the woman you believe I am, how can you deny me?"

I must neglect the story of how we were with one another, of the accommodations we reached, the mutualities we achieved, and the unmemorable civil wedding that followed. I would like to show you, to demonstrate with scene and line the exact proportions of the contentment we enclosed in our arms; but that is a common tale whose minutiae would distract from the less common one I am compelled to relate. Suffice it to say that it seemed we did have a connection. We became lovers with none of the usual falterings and tentativeness. It was as if we were lovers who had been apart awhile and needed only to reconnect in order to resurrect the institutions of our relationship. If someone had told me that I could be happy with a woman given to fits of temper and days-long periods during which she became cold and distant, a woman given to barking orders at me, I would have laughed at the prospect and said, "Not my type." But Ariel was exactly my type. It appeared there were places in me into which the spikes of her behaviors fit perfectly and, conversely, she was tolerant of my shifting moods which—I came to understand—were not dissimilar in their intensity and variety from her own.

I could not persuade Ariel to leave California. She was committed to uncovering her past and if she had to confront mortal danger in the process, that's what she would do. I moved in with her, bought the cabin in which she lived and a dozen acres around it, and spent a small fortune in having it enlarged and made secure. Electrified windows. Motion detectors in the surrounding trees—the cabin was situated in the midst of an evergreen forest, grand old-growth firs mixed in with pine and spruce. I purchased a small armory of rifles and handguns, but Ariel refused to let me keep any of them, limiting our defenses to a tranquilizer rifle. She did not want to kill Isha. Though he might be unable to communicate with her, to tell her about her old life, dead he would be useless.

I'm not sure if Ariel firmly believed that Isha would appear. The story, after all, had for her the reality of a dream and talking about it often made her uncomfortable. Though determined to uncover her past, at the same time she yearned to set it aside, to think of herself as an ordinary woman. The idea that she had once been a creature such as I described undermined the stability she had contrived. But I believed Isha would

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come for her and I became fanatical about our security. I had so many floodlights installed, I could turn night into day, and I went hunting with a tranquilizer rifle, potshotting and overdosing a number of small animals, starting up birds and dropping them from the air, until I felt confident I would be able to knock Isha down, however high he leaped. It was a thoroughly paranoid existence. We worked behind locked doors; I patrolled but otherwise rarely left Ariel alone; and I would drag her away from the cabin whenever possible. Still, it was a better life than I had ever had before. It seemed something had been out of balance, some delicate mechanism in my brain aligned out of true, and I had gone through life with a slight mental list, not quite attuned to the right frequency, a confused static impairing my progress. Everything was in balance now. Standing guard over Ariel satisfied a need that had lain dormant in me, and being with her was a deeper satisfaction yet. For all our pettinesses and tempers, we had our perfect days, our golden weeks, and when days were less than perfect, we took refuge in our work; but though we grew close as coins in a purse, there were moments when I watched her with a clinician's eye, wondering what part of her was hidden from me, what eerie comprehensions lay beyond the perimeters of her memory, a black exotic garden flourishing in her skull, and wondered, too, if those elements of her personality that allowed her to love me were merely a thin surface of learned behaviors that one day might dissolve and so release a fierce stranger into the world. Studying too much on these matters occasionally made me suspect that I had lost touch with reality. When given voice, the scenario into which I had bought sounded preposterous. Then Ariel would come into the room and my doubts would evaporate and I would know that however absurd the constituencies of my belief, I was in the presence of my fate.

In October of the year, Ariel's publisher called to let her know that they were sending her on tour in support of the second book. Though the start of the tour was months off, she brooded and grew distant. She said the thought of being away from the cabin depressed her, but the profundity of her depression persuaded me that some less discernable inner turmoil was its root cause. I doubt she completely understood it herself. When I asked what was wrong, she would fly into a rage—familiarity had taught me that this was her customary reaction to important questions for which she had no good answer. Left to my own devices, I tinkered with our security system, worked fitfully, and killed more small animals, including a toy poodle named Fidgets belonging to our nearest neighbors, an accident that encouraged me to break off my shooting spree. After burying Fidgets in the woods I returned to the cabin and began reading Ariel's book. I had previously skimmed it in draft, searching for clues to her history, but since much of the novel involved a speculative future, not a merely dubious past, I found it less illuminating than her first. I did, however, come across one instructive passage that either I had missed or had been added after my initial reading.

Ariel's strengths as a writer were pacing and plotting. Her handling of setting was a definite weakness, but early in the book there was a scene whose setting was remarkably well evoked and located, so much so that I

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wondered why her editor had let it stand, it was at such variance with the rest of the writing. In the scene Ah'raelle, her memory in tatters, is hurrying along through the West Virginia woods, carrying equipment she has brought from her vehicle, and because she can no longer recall what the equipment is or how to use it, wishing to lighten her burden, she buries it at the foot of an immense boulder close by the confluence of two streams. The boulder is covered with graffiti, heavily spray-painted, and overspread by an enormous tree, a water oak judging by the description; in among the roots of the tree are a number of ritual objects: candles, handsewn sachets, crude homemade dolls, and so forth. On reading this, I recalled the pack that the woman who leaped from the pit had carried. Could it be buried in the West Virginia hills? If I were to accept the chronology of the novel, if that timeline reflected reality, the burial had taken place more than a year after the crash and thus the pack was probably buried somewhere in the vicinity of Durbin.

That afternoon I called my old traveling companion Whirlie Henley and asked if he was available for a walk in the woods; I would pay the same rate as before.

"You ain't goin' after long, tall, and vicious again, are ya?" he asked.

"It's a related matter," I told him. "But I can guarantee we won't be running into her."

"How the hell you gon' do that?"

"Trust me. She's not anywhere near West Virginia."

"You still chasin' after her?"

"You might say."

Grudgingly, Henley accepted my offer and we arranged to meet two weeks from the day at Mickey's—it would take me that long, I believed, to convince Ariel we should make the trip. As things turned out it took me only ten days. She flatly resisted at first on the grounds she might miss an opportunity to contact Isha. I told her it seemed that Isha was a persistent sort and I cited the plethora of material in her book relating to predestination. "If there's any truth to it," I said, "you can't avoid another encounter." Acceding to this argument, she tried another tack, saying she had no wish to return to a place where she had been so miserable. I hadn't informed her of my actual reason for returning; she was in a fragile mental state and I did not want to risk upsetting her to the point that she would blow off her tour. Instead I'd told her I had business in Green Bank and now I suggested that while I was taking care of it, she could visit the Krishna temple in Moundsville. "You'll make ol' Shivananda's day," I said. Her memories of the temple were not altogether unpleasant, and finally she relented. Six days later, after a thirty-minute drive followed by a ten-minute walk, Henley and I stood beside a massive, richly tagged boulder at the confluence of two streams, shaded by a venerable water oak. Its leaves had turned, but few had fallen. The air was damp and cold, the ground soaked by a recent rain.

"You told me what you're lookin' for," Henley had said when I met him at Mickey's, "I coulda saved you some worry. Everybody 'round Durbin knows the Damsel Oak. Witchy women come out here to cast spells. High school kids use it for partyin'. Thing's damn near a tourist attraction."

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While Henley watched I dug with a short-handled shovel, excavating a trench around the boulder. Ariel's description stated that Ah'raelle had buried her equipment deep. Given that she had been working with her hands, I had not expected "deep" meant other than the extreme end of shallow. A couple of feet down, maybe. But I had no luck at that depth. Sweaty and irritated, my shoulders aching, I took a break.

Perched atop the boulder, Henley removed his Mountaineers cap, ran a hand through his graying hair and said, "Willowy Woman was pretty damn strong. You might hafta go down a ways."

"No shit." I examined my palms. Unblistered for now, but not for long.

"'Course we might have the wrong rock."

"Uh-huh."

"Then somebody coulda already dug up whatever it is you're after."

"So how the Mountaineers doing this season?" I asked, hoping to cut short this litany of woeful possibility.

Henley's breezy mood soured. "Doin' all right."

"Yeah, I caught part of the Syracuse game. That was a Little League game, they would have applied the mercy rule and shut it down,"

"Boys had some injuries was what it was."

"Sure, that's it."

The stream chuckled and slurped along in its banks. Henley appeared to be listening to it.

"Maybe you better get on back to diggin'," he said. "Ain't much light left."

The sun lowered and a starless dark descended. The occasional rustle from the surrounding woods—that was all the sound except for the rush of the water and my grunts. Henley built a fire and cooked. After a meal of beans and franks, though I was fatigued and sore, I jumped down into the trench again, working in bursts, taking frequent rests. Around ten o'clock, at a depth of five feet, I struck something on the stream side of the boulder. I scraped dirt away from it, then fell to my knees and pried it free. A case covered in dark red material. My hands were so cramped I could barely pick it up, and when I managed to get a grip I discovered it weighed in the neighborhood of sixty pounds. I remembered how easily Ariel had leaped from the hollow, holding it in one hand. Like Henley said, she had been pretty damn strong.

I dragged the case to the fire and sat cross-legged in front of it. With the fire leaping, casting the case in a hellish light, and the shadows of flames dancing on the side of the tent, I felt like a shaman staring at a magic box. I'd assumed it would be tricky to open, but was surpised to find that there was only a simple catch. Emergency equipment, I told myself. Designed for those who were losing their memories and might not be able to deal with something more complex. That did not explain, however, why they hadn't secured it with a lock keyed to DNA. Perhaps they allowed for the possibility that the person stranded might be critically injured and require help in accessing the case. Overcome by fatigue, it was not until that moment I understood the magnitude of what I had found or considered the difficulties that might arise from the discovery. Cold, I grew colder yet.

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"You gon' open it or what?" Henley asked, squatting at my side.

"Maybe you don't want to see this."

"I been waitin' around all day for it!"

"There's people who might ask you questions about what's inside. They're not good people."

Henley tipped back his cap, rubbed his forehead with a knuckle. "You think it's drugs or somethin'?"

"I don't know what it is."

"Hell, I'll take a peek if you don't mind," Henley said, kneeling. "Seein' how she like to half-kill me, I reckon I got a stake in things."

Sap popped in the fire; silence seemed to gather itself into something big and black and bulging above the trees.

I lifted the lid.

Inside the case was a gray metal panel indented with several dozen shallow depressions—three dozen to be exact—most occupied by silver cylinders, each slimmer and shorter than a fountain pen. Four held larger items, also silvery in color, but with claw-shaped ends. I had no idea what I was seeing. My initial assumption was that they were tools, but thirty-two tools of the same shape and size . . . it made no sense. I lifted one from the case. It had to weigh half a pound. The metal was warm, signifying a heat source within.

Henley picked another up and held it to catch the firelight, turning it this way and that. I set my cylinder back in the case and when I glanced at Henley again I saw that he appeared to be frozen in place, staring at the cylinder with a confused expression.

"What is it?" I asked.

He gave no answer and I touched his arm. The muscles were rigid.

"Whirlie?" I said; then, after a pause, "You hear me?"

He remained unmoving, not even a twitch.

For several minutes during which I began to fear for him and wondered how I would explain a catatonic redneck, Henley did not stir; then, expelling a hoarse sigh, he dropped the cylinder and sank onto his side. Greatly relieved, I asked what had happened.

"I can't sort it out," he said dazedly. "It was a buncha pictures and things." He sat up. "They started comin' when I was studying it up close and pushed in the ends. Go on . . . give 'er a try. Didn't hurt or nothin'. It's just weird."

Holding a cylinder up to eye level, I did as he had instructed. I felt a weak vibration in the metal. Then the pictures and things started to come. For the duration of the experience I was a receiver, accepting a flow of information relayed as images, and was unable to gain a clear perspective on what I was seeing. If, like Henley, I'd had no knowledge of the situation, I would have been mightily confused, and even given the knowledge I did have, I was somewhat confused, my head so full of strangeness, I too had difficulty sorting it out. But I understood that the cylinders contained what would be essential should one of the Akashel encounter an emergency and be stranded far from home: memories.

Ariel's memories.

I tried four cylinders in all. One was a collection of images relating to

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the operation of the sarcophagus-like ships in which the Akashel traveled. The second offered an overview of the current state of the Weave; the third provided language instruction—I assumed it was the language Ariel had once spoken. All three used images to convey concepts and—in the case of the language instructional—to illustrate word sounds and ideographs, and these had been culled from her experience. It was her long-fingered grayish hands operating the controls of the ship, her voice sounding out words in my mind, her memories of missions past that increased my understanding of the Weave.

Why hadn't she taken advantage of this resource?

I speculated that she might have been injured in the explosion. A head injury that caused her to lose her memory even before electron decay had wiped it out. Or maybe it had been a conscious decision. According to the second volume of the trilogy, she had despaired over having to kill Isha. She might have seen the destruction of the ship as an opportunity to avoid completing her mission. Or maybe the destruction of the ship eliminated any possibility of return and she had decided that memory loss was preferable to the yearning of an exile. But if that were so, why had she headed for the SETI array near Green Bank? Coincidence? From what I had just learned of the Weave, coincidence was a faulty concept. The cylinders with the clawlike ends might, I thought, have some application in this regard, but I was leering of experimenting with them.

The fourth cylinder contained personal memories and made me reluctant to investigate a fifth. The intensity of Ariel's emotional range, her sexual reactions, her extreme devotion to the man whose grotesque face loomed above her in the act of love, all this left my own emotions in a tangle. Nothing I learned from any of the cylinders fit perfectly in my brain. Receiving her memories was like trying on a hat that was too large—I kept having to prevent it from falling down over my eyes—and all my new knowledge was imperfectly seated, my comprehension full of gaps. Her passions leaped high in me, bright and fertile as flames, sowing patches of inappropriate heat throughout my body. I felt muddled, my identity eroded.

The next morning as I lashed the case to my pack, Henley asked what I was going to do with it. I'd spent much of the night considering that very question, concluding that there was no choice other than to pass the case on to Ariel—here was the past she had been desperately seeking. Not all of it, of course. Her sojourn in the woods was forever lost. But in those cylinders were answers to her most urgent questions. I was fearful of the changes they might provoke. Would they disable her capacity for living in this alien environment? Would she recall a means of returning to the place from which she came? Would old memories create a dissonance with the new, a conflict that would destabilize her damaged core? And more pertinent to my selfish interests, would her love for Isha burn away what she felt for me?

Two nights later at the Mountain Dew Motel, when I told her about the cylinders, she expressed dismay that I had not been forthcoming about the purpose of the trip; but it was dismay tempered by distraction. The case itself commanded most of her attention. I left her with it and re-

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treated to the restaurant adjoining the motel, where I ate a cheeseburger and a slice of chocolate pie. Now and then on the two-lane blacktop that ran past the motel, a pick-up or a fifteen-year-old car would rattle past, and as I stared out the window my thoughts came to reflect a similar intermittency, rising out of a despondent fugue, engaging me for a second, then fading; but as my emotions cooled, I began to think about what I had learned. In particular, what I had learned about the Weave.

From Ariel's books I had gained an impression of opposing forces who sought to manipulate events throughout the multiverse to their own ends, one creating a circumstance that the other would then modify. But that was a gross simplification. Complicated by the buckshot effect, the operations of the Akashel and Akhitai were essentially infinite in scope. The image I had fashioned of shuttles passing back and forth across an immense loom was about as apt as it would be to describe a galaxy as a few stars and some clumps of dirt—there were so many missions, so many repetitions thereof, it was more appropriate to view the Weave in terms of a cockroach army swarming a kitchen floor. To think of Ariel as part of this, not a soldier but part of an uncontrollable infestation, appalled me and I wanted to deny it; but the information I had gleaned from the old Ariel's understanding of the Weave rendered this view undeniable. The struggle between the Akashel and the Akhitai was less a war contested by opponents with contrary moral and philosophical imperatives than the desperate attempts of two exterminators with variant methods to prevent an unraveling of the fabric of time and space caused by the bugs they had released. The multiverse was falling apart, a rotting tapestry increasingly enfeebled by the holes the Akashel and Akhitai were punching in it. Ariel, Isha, and all their fellows had become both problem and solution, cancer and cure.

Depressing though this was, the knowledge steadied me. My position was that of a man adrift on the ocean who discovers that the shore toward which he's been rowing is a mirage. What is there to do except keep rowing? I checked my watch. Two and half hours had passed since I'd left Ariel. Impatient to know her mind, to discover if I had lost her, I paid my bill and returned to our room. She was sitting on the end of the bed with her head down, the case open beside her, cylinders strewn across the blanket, and she was holding a gun. Not an ordinary gun. Made of dull red metal. No trigger guard and no apparent trigger. It had the look and size of a souped-up power drill. The grip was so large she had to use both hands. Lifting it and setting it down on the bed cost her considerable effort.

"You didn't look underneath the cylinders," she said when I asked about the gun. She patted the case. "False bottom."

I dropped onto the bed beside her. "How's it work?"

"You squeeze the grip to fire. I'm not strong enough anymore. I'm not sure you're strong enough."

I made to grab it and she stopped me.

"Don't," she said. "You could destroy the motel if it went off."

"I want to see how heavy it is."

"Don't!"

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I lay down, propped on an elbow, trying to see inside her head. "You okay?"

She gave a perfunctory nod. "Fine."

"Real fine? Ordinary fine?"

A flash of exasperation crossed her face, but then she said, "Better than I was. At least I understand some things."

"Did you try all the cylinders?" I asked.

"No."

"Aren't you going to?"

She worried her lower lip, as if contemplating an answer, but kept silent and after a long moment she put her hand on mine. I intertwined my fingers with hers. "Are we okay?" I asked.

"That's not the easiest question to answer."

She seemed to be vacillating between the poles of her personality, passing in an instant from sweet uncertainty to stoic, hard, unapproachable. I had a few hundred more questions, but decided to cut to the chase.

"You still love me?"

She lay beside me, pulled my head to her breast and whispered something. I tensed, thinking she had spoken the name of her old lover. Then she spoke again and there was the hint of an R in her pronunciation, just as occurred whenever she tried to say "ridge," and I realized that she had spoken my given name, Richard—with her impediment, it came out, "Isha."

Despite not having used my Christian name since childhood, I should have figured out this part of the puzzle. The way Ariel seemed to recognize me in the woods near Durbin; our instant familiarity when we met in New York; the ease with which we became lovers; those and a thousand other cues should have made me aware that I was Isha's analogue, his multiversal twin. I had been so immersed in Ariel's problems, I'd neglected to consider my role in her story and failed to take to heart the hypothesis that coincidence was not the product of chance.

Instead of destroying us, as I'd feared, the knowledge that Ariel and I were two halves of an inevitability came to tighten the bond between us. I accepted that obsession was not an aberrance but the foundation of my character. Her questions about her past resolved, Ariel's moods grew less volatile and she devoted herself to nurturing the relationship. Our lives continued to be ruled by caution, but if I had graphed the progress of the relationship during the holidays and the first months of the new year, the line would have made a steady ascent.

In March we were back in New York, she going the rounds of bookstores, doing signings, while I played third wheel or wandered about the city. On the last afternoon of our stay I was walking along Canal when a slim graying man carrying a briefcase, wearing jeans and an I Heart NY T-shirt beneath a windbreaker, stepped from the herd of pedestrians and accosted me, saying, "Dick Cyrus! Been a while, huh?"

He had a narrow, bony face that seemed naturally to accommodate a sardonic expression. His accent was Deep South, the edges planed off his drawl by, I imagined, years of urban exile. I assumed he was someone I'd

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met at a reading or a signing and I adopted a pleasant manner, greeted him and made my excuses.

He caught my arm. "You don't remember me, do you?"

"Sorry," I said, and pulled free.

"It was years ago. Ann Arbor. My name's Siskin. Peter Siskin. I used to be Paul Capuano's aide."

I felt a surge of anxiety. "Oh, yeah. Sure." I shook his hand. "How's Capuano doing with his . . . y'know?"

"Paul's moved on," he said smoothly. "But I'm still in the same business. More or less. Can I buy you something to drink?" Siskin gestured at the restaurant we were standing beside. "Cuppa coffee, a soda? You tried those drinks they sell down here? Ones with the little balls of tapioca floating in 'em? Really refreshing!"

I hesitated.

"C'mon," he said. "Something I'd like to talk to you about."

I let him steer me into the restaurant. After we had taken a table and ordered, he said, "I've been reading your books. Interesting stuff." His smile was thoroughly sincere. "Tell you the truth"—he opened his briefcase—"I just finished your wife's book. Little too weird for me, but hey"—another smile—"whatever sells, huh?"

"What's this about?" I asked.

He pulled Ariel's book from the briefcase and showed me her picture on the dust jacket. "It's her, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's my wife," I said carefully.

"Beautiful woman." Siskin shook his head admiringly, then gave me a steady look. "It's her, isn't it?"

"I said it was, didn't I?"

Siskin chuckled appreciatively. "Nice!"

"Why don't you show me some ID?" I said.

"Oh, sure. ID." He extricated a leather badge holder from the briefcase. "I got a bunch."

The badge stated that Siskin was an operative of the Central Intelligence Agency. He dropped two more badge holders beside the first. FBI and NSC.

"We're not exactly an agency," he said apologetically. "So we don't have our own badges. Folks been kind enough to let us use theirs."

"I'm going to go now," I said. "Unless you give me a reason not to."

"You didn't answer my question."

"It's a stupid fucking question!"

The waiter sidled up with my coffee and Siskin's tapioca drink.

"These things are absolutely delicious!" Siskin said after taking a sip. "Wanna try? I can ask for another straw." When I refused he shrugged and sipped again. "We're not interested in your wife, Mister Cyrus. We understand she'd be no help to us now. Probably wouldn't have noticed her if it hadn't been for her book. We've got fresh trails to follow."

I considered what his words implied. "You've started it up again."

"Not so you'd notice." Siskin's tapioca drink gurgled in his straw.

"How'd you do it? I thought . . ."

"We got lucky. One of the hard drives wasn't totally fucked and we re-

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covered a lot of data. Then we really got lucky. Or maybe there's no such thing as luck. That's what some of the science boys tell me."

He pulled a sheaf of photographic prints from the case and one, an 8 x 11 that depicted a crater with a bunkerlike structure at the bottom of it, slipped from his grasp and fell onto the floor. I thought at first it was an old photo of Rahul's project in Tuttle's Hollow, but noticed that the array atop the bunker was much more complex than the array I had seen in Capuano's video. The location was definitely Tuttle's Hollow, however—I recognized the trees and the folds of the crater. Whoever Siskin represented, rebuilding the project on the site of the original, after such a violent and observable disaster, demonstrated that they were arrogant to a fault.

Siskin hurriedly picked up the photograph, stowed it away and displayed another—this of a man lying in an open metal sarcophagus. His face was curiously deformed, yet struck me as familiar. Dark gray skin; yellowish membranes over the eyes; striations on his cheeks. He did not appear to be alive. Siskin pointed to the sarcophagus. "Looks kind of like the vehicles your wife talks about in her book. What you think that is? Life imitating art or vice versa?"

"You tell me. Seems like you've got it all under control."

"Yeah, we're running a regular shuttle these days," Siskin said expansively. "Bringing back all sorts of intriguing individuals. This fella here now. . . ."

"If you're not interested in Ariel, why bother me?"

"Perhaps I overstated our lack of interest. We're mildly interested. Not enough to bring her in, but enough to warrant this conversation."

"So why am I here?"

"I'd like you to keep on taking care of your wife. If something out of the ordinary happens, let us know. I can be reached through this number." He slid a business card across the table, blank except for a number with a Manhattan area code and a tiny symbol in one corner that resembled the "at" symbol in a dot.com address. "Something does happen, I'll find out. And if you haven't called me, I will bring your wife in."

I didn't trust myself to speak.

"Now don't go getting all angry," Siskin said.

"You don't need me to spy for you."

"Oh, yes we do. I don't understand it completely, but it relates to that 'anthropic' junk you told us about back in Ann Arbor. Seems like if we're watching what goes on, we might change what can happen. We prefer to let things happen naturally and rely on patriots like yourself to keep us informed. You give us the heads-up, we'll take over from there." He had another sip and sighed in satisfaction. "'Course the likelihood is nothing will happen. But I wanted to rope you in just on the off-chance."

"Fuck you," I said. "I'm not about to sell her out."

"I'm not asking that. If something happens we'll investigate and that'll be it. You really don't want me in your life, Mister Cyrus. But if I have to be in your life, you want me in and out as quick as possible." He studied Ariel's picture and made a noise akin to his sigh of satisfaction. He dropped the book into the briefcase, snapped it shut.

"Aren't you going to warn me not to tell anyone about this?" I asked as he stood.

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"Oh, right. I forgot." He gave me a cheerful wink. "Don't you breathe a word now, y'hear?"

When she returned to our hotel that night, Ariel was exhilarated by the reception she had received from her fans, and she insisted we do something special on our last night. She washed up, put on a fresh outfit, and we went spiraling off into the city, dinner at a four-star Vietnamese restaurant, Brazilian music at SOBs, cocktails at the Vanguard while listening to the Dave Douglas Quintet, then more drinks at a trendy Dumbo bar which had no name and catered to people uniformly possessed of a disaffected personal style that caused them to seem citizens of a different universe from the one we inhabited. Several times I thought to tell her about Siskin, but I didn't want to wreck the evening. She was exuberant as never before. Radiating confidence and joy. Back at the hotel, a little drunk but not sleepy, we made love into the small hours and during a lull, as we lay side by side, she kissed my neck and said, "I can't believe it. . . . I feel so clear!"

I pulled her atop me and entered her. She moved with me for a few seconds, then rested her head on my shoulder and said, "It's like I've escaped and come home!"

"Should I be distressed about you editorializing while we fuck?" I asked. "It suggests a certain distance."

She ground her hips against me. "You shouldn't be distressed about anything. You're most of what I'm feeling."

Later, as we drifted toward sleep, instead of turning away and tucking up her knees as was her habit, she flung an arm across my chest, pressing herself into me. And on the return flight to California she held my hand and talked about traveling to Europe, to Asia. She mentioned children, a topic we had never discussed. Back at the cabin we took to staying in bed until noon and regularly went into Arcata for dinners and movies. Like a normal couple on a rustic honeymoon. Things were so good they scared me. It was like living inside a crystal sphere, charmed by the delicate musical vibrations that chimed around you, knowing all the while they signaled a terrible fragility. Yet accompanying this was a sense of enchantment, of a precious, magical time that demanded everything of me, and I surrendered to it, foregoing all thoughts of security, yielding up my fears, basking in the light we made together. Those gaps created by our awareness of one another's differences melted away—we were joined seamlessly, two puzzle pieces that had been interlocked for so long, their substances had merged. I could a write a book about those days that no one except me would want to read, because there would be no conflict, no arc of character or plot, no dramatic pace or thematic consummation. It was peace. It was love. It was a child's dream in its playfulness and beauty, crisp mornings and cool deep nights fencing golden afternoons. Nothing disrupted it. Phone calls, business, tedious chores, a broken appliance—these things were elements of the dream, opportunities for interaction and not annoyances. I had traveled a long road from obsession to love, and now it seemed I had traveled an even longer road

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in an instant, a road that led from love to shared exaltation, a state of vital calm that had in it no tinge of boredom or commonality. I was alive in Ariel and she in me.

There came an evening when I drove to the general store some ten minutes away along a winding blacktop to buy some fuses, and when it was time to pay I discovered I had misplaced my wallet. I called Ariel on my cell and asked her if I had left it at home. She did a search and returned to the phone, saying she had found it. Her voice was strained and I asked if anything was wrong.

"Are you coming straight back?" she asked.

"Yeah . . . what's the matter?"

"Just get back here," she said, using a peremptory tone that I had not heard from her for months.

Dusk had fallen by the time I returned. Ariel was waiting outside the door, her arms folded, her face gleaming in the half-light. I parked the car and as I walked toward her she did not change her pose, staring off into the trees, her expression stony. Before I could speak she thrust something at me. A business card, the one Siskin had given me in New York—it had been loose in my wallet.

"Look," I said. "I don't . . ."

"You bastard!" She sailed the card at me. "I can't trust any of you!"

"What the hell's going on?" I picked the card up, unsure how to spin things, not knowing how much she knew.

"Don't play games! I'm . . . oh, God! You make me sick!"

"Christ, Ariel! I'm sorry! It was just this guy in New York. He was the guy with—"

"Just this guy? Fuck you! Do you think I'm a fool?"

She stalked away and I followed. "The guy who was with Paul Capuano . . . when he showed me the video. I hadn't seen him since then. I meant to tell you, but that was our last night in New York. You remember how that was."

"Give me your phone."

Baffled, I fumbled in my jacket pocket. "Who're you gonna call?"

"Just give it to me!"

She held the phone so I could see her punch the buttons and dialed the number written on the card, omitting the area code. "Two," she said. "That's A. Five. That's K. Four. That's H. Four again. That's I. Do you see it? Eight. That's T. Two. Another A. Four. I."

I had spelled the word out before she finished.

Akhitai.

"Maybe it's just . . ." I let the sentence trail off.

"What? A coincidence?" She snatched the card from me and pointed at the tiny symbol printed in the corner. "What did you think this was?"

"The 'at' sign," I told her. "Maybe I wasn't thinking at all. I . . . Jesus! I couldn't. . . . You were so happy, I didn't want to alarm you."

"Well, I'm alarmed, okay? I'm extremely alarmed." She crumpled the card and tossed it. "I don't believe you. No one could be that stupid." She put her hands to her head and said, "God! It's always the same. . . ." She fell back a step and glared at me bitterly. "You asshole!"

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"Ariel . . ." I reached out to her and she swung the cell phone, striking me hard on my temple. I stumbled sideways a step or two.

"Keep away from me!" She shouted this with such force, it bent her nearly double, then threw the phone at me, hitting me in the chest. "Go away! Get out of here! Go!"

I tried to explain myself again, but she wouldn't hear me. She ran into the cabin, slammed the door. I heard the bolt slide shut. Dazed, I went to the door and called to her, but she refused to answer. I began to explain what had happened with Siskin. Loud music issued from behind the door, drowning me out. I pounded on the door, shouting her name. One of the windows was flung open; the barrel of our tranquilizer rifle protruded. She screamed at me, telling me to leave. I was so thoroughly stunned, unable to process what was going on, the rifle seemed like a joke. A bad one, but funny nonetheless. Why would she shoot? She knew she had nothing to fear from me. I moved toward the window, telling her to turn down the music so we could talk. The dart struck my right chest below my collarbone. I reeled backward, already feeling the effects. The dose each dart contained was designed to drop someone much bigger and stronger than myself, and as I staggered away from the cabin, trying for the car, I wondered if Ariel had killed me. My eyelids drooped. I felt nauseated and weak. I sank to my knees. There was a roaring in my ears that drowned out the music. A hot pressure on my skin. My field of vision shrank to a tunnel rimmed by fluttering black edges, a dwindling telescopic view, and I had a sense of slippage, as if I were sliding away inside myself, unable to grab hold of my thoughts, but trying to grab onto something. I remembered a phrase in an old blues song: "feeling funny in my mind. . . ." For no reason I could fathom, it sparked a confidence that I would be all right and I lapsed into unconsciousness with a feeling of relief.

It was dark when I waked. The first thing I noticed was a beetle crawling across the carpet of pine needles beside me—it was moving away from my face, a circumstance for which I was grateful, because I was too weak to brush it aside. The next thing that impinged on my consciousness was a reedy yet resonant voice speaking in a sibilant language, calling out to Ariel, begging her to listen. This confused me on several levels. Though my understanding was imperfect, I didn't understand how it was I understood it at all, nor did I know who was speaking. It was essentially repeating what I had been saying to Ariel, and I thought I might be having a disassociative reaction and that I was the one speaking. But as my head cleared I realized the voice was coming from behind me. I managed to turn onto my back. Though the beetle had been in relatively sharp focus, this larger view of the world took a moment to align. Trees, cabin, sky . . . they whirled a few spins, settling into a tremulous stability. I saw no one else in the vicinity. Then the voice called out again and a pale spindly figure stepped around the corner of the cabin.

At that distance, some thirty feet, I could not make out his face, but the extreme elongation of his limbs and his tight-fitting grayish-white suit—almost indistinguishable from the color of his skin—told me all I needed to know. The top of his head was level with the edge of the cabin roof. He

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paused by the door and hailed Ariel again. She answered in that same liquid, hissing language, telling him, as she had told me, to leave. And also, as with me, she called him "Isha." He flung his left arm up in a gesture that, despite its inhumanly hinged articulation, I recognized as an emblem of frustration, and went pacing back and forth in front of the cabin, each stride carrying him almost a third of its width. Soon he broke off his pacing, returned to the door and after calling out to Ariel again, he kicked it in, an apparently minimal effort that blew it off its supports.

Still groggy, until this point I'd been unable to gather what I was seeing into a frame, but as Isha disappeared inside the cabin, the urgency of the situation hit home. I struggled to my feet and caught a glimpse of a coffin-shaped lozenge of dark red metal standing off among the trees, its lid open to reveal a shallow concavity within. It seemed so out of place against the backdrop of spruce and pine, it stopped me for a moment. I swayed and blotches swam before my eyes. Ariel began to cry out in panic, each shriek stabbing into me, and I started toward the door, but before I had covered half the distance between the patch of ground where I had fallen and the cabin, Isha emerged with Ariel in tow. She screamed, clawed ineffectually at his hand, which engulfed her upper right arm. There was no time to go for a weapon. I threw myself in a shoulder block at his knees, thinking his joints would be a weakness. It was like tackling an iron bar—an iron bar that had the stench of a rotting carcass. I grasped an ankle, locked my other arm about his calf, but he flicked me off as easily as I might have dislodged a leg-humping terrier, sending me tumbling through the air. Blinky and shaken, lying crumpled on my side, I had an unobstructed view of his face. It was even uglier than those Ariel had drawn. Long hollow cheeks marked by vertical ridges—whether they were scars or some sensory apparatus, I cannot say. Eyes close together, almond-shaped surfaces concealed by membranes that appeared to have a yellowish crackling glaze. A scalp twigged with twists of black hair; a broad forehead and a tapered chin forming an inverted triangle that enclosed his features. The seat of his ugliness, however, was the area occupied by the mouth and nose. It appeared that something shaped like the base of a tripod had taken out a chunk of flesh, leaving tattered flaps of skin that only partly concealed a glistening mauve depth. The flaps palpitated as with an erratic gush of breath. The idea of his hands on Ariel sickened and enraged me. She screamed again. I picked myself up and charged Isha, eluded his defensive blow and jammed my fist into that central ugliness, into the glutinous heat of his throat. My fingers caught the flaps surrounding the maw as he jerked back his head. I clutched at them, tore at the loose skin. Letting out a high-pitched gurgling, he swatted me away. I went rolling on the ground and when I glanced up Isha was holding his mouth, blood leaking between nearly foot-long fingers that looked like dirty bones. Ariel had broken free and was running directly toward Isha's vehicle, running full out, pumping her arms, her hair flying. Isha saw her, too, and I expect my sinking feeling mirrored his, for we both called after her at the same moment, our voices blending in a duet of pleading. It had no appreciable effect. She fitted herself into the vehicle, staring out at us; her hand went to a panel and the door began to swing shut.

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I think she looked at me before the door sealed her from view, and I later told myself that in her look was a measure of regret, of longing. But I know her mind was arrowing ahead to some distant landing where she would change and forget not only me, but everything she knew. That was, I believe now, the reason she buried the cylinders after arriving on our shore. She wanted surcease and only forgetfulness would bring it to her. And this time, once she succeeded in forgetting, she would find a safe harbor and there build a new life. Until Isha found her. The Isha of that place, alien in form and speech, doting, obsessed, mad for her. I know this now, but at the time I knew only that she was gone beyond me.

A roaring came to my ears. It seemed to arise from every surface, not the issue of one mouth but the consensus of a trillion. The nausea I was feeling doubled and redoubled in force, cramping me, and through slitted eyes I watched the forest ripple, the entire landscape rippling about the solid dark red object at its midst. Isha, I realized, had distanced himself from the vehicle. Trusting to his instincts, I made for the cabin, glancing back as I passed through the door. The vehicle appeared to be shrinking, receding into instability, still solid itself, but inset into an opaque turbulence that stretched tunnel-like into an unreal distance. Needles lifted from the ground, yet there was no wind to speak of and the motion of that airborne debris did not seem the product of a current, but a vibration I could not feel. Then I felt it. A hot pressure on my face—it was as if the molecules of the air had knitted together, forming a second, too-tight skin. Everything looked to have brightened. Metal glinted, rocks glowed. Even the darkness held a shine. The vehicle continued to dwindle, becoming no bigger than a red splinter at the heart of a vortex. My own heart felt the same size, drained of blood and warmth.

I stopped just inside the cabin door. Isha was nowhere to be seen and this apparent sign of his caution convinced me to retreat deeper into the room; but I refused to turn away. I wanted to see the last of Ariel, to hold onto all of her I could for a while longer. The roaring rose in pitch and gradually thinned into a keening so intense, it kindled a fiery pinprick of pain in my skull. A supernal brightness infused the scene. The spruce trunks gleamed like burnished copper and their boughs had gone a solarized green. The shapes of things were distorted, elongated, like images painted on a fabric that was being stretched, indented by the receding ship, now reduced to a speck of redness at the center of a whirlpool of troubled air.

I had an apprehension that something calamitous was about to happen; I raced into the bedroom and shut the door. As I stood there, thinking I had overreacted, I heard a sound: a snap not unlike the discharge of a static spark, yet somehow organic, almost like the slap of water against a pier and, though no louder than, say, the pop of a faulty speaker on a concert stage, frightening in that it seemed to issue from within my body. A pressure wave must have followed, for I wound up on the floor, my head jammed into the corner. Woozy, my mind curiously blank, but unhurt. Not a single ache or pain, as if instead of being flung into the corner, I had been displaced and set down in that awkward position. I sat up, had a look around and noticed that the bed stood closer to the wall than I re-

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membered. And the framed photograph of sea stacks along the Oregon coast above the bed, I could have sworn it had been hung higher. And the door, the grain of the spruce planks that formed it had, I was certain, been sharper. Lying in bed, I had often contrived pictures of their patterns, Native American shapes, animals and ritual designs; now I could see nothing of the kind. Whether this remarked upon a change in my perceptions or in the room itself, I had no clue, but it made me wonder if my body, too, had changed, perhaps in some deleterious way. Then a clatter from the living room, as of furniture being knocked about, yanked me back into the moment. Isha, cheated of his quarry, was hunting me.

Fear was sharp in me and I would have gone through the window, but the window was electronically locked and the punch code wouldn't work. Maybe the circuitry, I thought, had undergone a change. The tranquilizer rifle was in the living room, where Ariel had left it. I searched about for a weapon and recalled the case, stored in the closet wall safe. I opened the closet, fumbled with the combination, hauled out the case, listening all the while to Isha wrecking the cabin on his way along the corridor. I removed Ariel's gun from the case. Fifteen pounds of dull red metal. We had never tried to fire it and I had no confidence it could be fired, but I hoped it would discourage him.

Either Isha was unfamiliar with doorknobs or else he considered them inappropriate—the door flew off its hinges with a splintering crash and toppled across the bed. He ducked his head in, spotted me and entered with a sinuous twisting movement that made my heart leap. I trained the gun at him, holding it in both hands, and squeezed the grip; but to no result. I squeezed a second time, exerting greater pressure, and when again nothing happened, Isha gave forth with a seething, spit-filled sound that I, in my fear, took for gloating laughter. He could have reached me in a single stride, but he remained standing inside the door. Though I had the thought that he might not want to kill me, it was swept aside by the menace of his physicality. The bloody maw and those cracked yellow eyes and his fingers—I imagined them ripping the cartilage of my throat. As I readjusted my hold on the gun in order to exert more pressure, my forefinger touched a soft depression in the metal and the weapon came alive with a throbbing. Perhaps Isha was blessed with extraordinarily acute senses and felt it, too, for he spoke then the only words I allowed him to speak, and though as I've said my comprehension of his language was imperfect, the gist of his message came through:

"Brother," he said. "This is all for nothing."

Only later did I consider that he might not have been asking for his life, but was making a more general statement, commenting upon our mutual futility or all futilities. The throbbing evolved into a hum and though there was no visible discharge, a fluid tremor passed through the metal and Isha, stretching out his hands, perhaps in entreaty, disintegrated. It was not an instantaneous event and bore some similarity to the process that had concentrated his vehicle into a speck, but was much quicker and less organized in its development. He flattened out against the backdrop of the cabin wall, curved inward as if an invisible ball had rolled into him, and then was ripped apart, a piecemeal dismembering, bits of flesh spray-

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ing, gouts of blood erupting, all borne backward against the wall, which itself began to disintegrate in the exact same fashion, blood and bone and wood and insulation blending into a flurry of pinkish dissolution. Horrified, I laid down the gun, but the process continued soundlessly for a grisly inch of time, devouring the living room, eroding the ground beneath it, carving a pit where what passed for our front yard had been, leaving me standing in the wreckage of my life, gazing out at darkness and the forest, less now by a few evergreens that also had been taken to wherever Isha had flown.

The storm of those last minutes in the cabin blotted out every feeling other than fear, but as I sat on the edge of the pit afterward, numb and unreasoning, Ariel came back to me in the shape of a fiery absence, and the obsession from which love had sprung returned to stalk my brain, picking up the trail it had forsaken months before. Even in hopelessness, in the depths of loss, I clung to the fact that she was alive, and before long, before the sky paled and an actual light shone down to disperse the glowing too-real phantoms I created of the dark, my guilts and errors given nightmare form . . . from that fact I constructed a scheme to win her once again. I did not believe in it at first. It seemed a desperate fantasy whose sole product was false confidence; but in my derelict state, false confidence was my best resource, my one alternative to collapse.

Toward eight o'clock a drizzle interrupted my mental struggle, driving me inside the ruin of the cabin. For ten or fifteen minutes I wandered about, touching Ariel's things. A pen, a dress, a pill bottle, a lipstick. Touching them opened me to the exigencies of grief. I rejected grief, refused to let it own me, and turned to making lists, plotting strategies, testing theories against the newly acquired logics of of my experience. And when I had exhausted this process, I went into the bedroom, opened Ariel's case, removed a cylinder and began to complete my education.

If one adopts a Buddhist platform, and lately this has seemed to me a reasonable stance, it becomes evident that life is compounded of mistakes, errors of omission and commission, that every worldly goal leads one deeper into the entanglements of illusion. Perhaps this was what Isha meant when he said that what we did was all for nothing. As the event of his death receded and grew more subject to analysis, I came to believe that he had not wanted to kill me and was motivated by our natural affinity to confront me, and that I, in judging his actions, had made a mistake. Being aware of this and of the general truth underlying it was, of course, no guarantee that I would not continue to make mistakes, and so it was that ten days after Ariel fled into the multiverse, running from me, from Isha, from—I suspect—all Ishas everywhere, I set out walking toward Tuttle's Hollow from a point on the highway southeast of Durbin, accompanied once again by Whirlie Henley. I had paid Henley an exorbitant amount for his services. He was not eager to go near the hollow, but had agreed to guide me to within six miles of it, to a streambed that would lead me to a point less than a hundred yards away.

"There's soldiers back in there, y'know," he'd said as we sat over beer and whiskey at Mickey's. "They always running people off. 'Pears like

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they got 'bout a three, four mile perimeter. Get any closer and they know you there."

I said I was aware of the soldiers.

"How you gon' deal with 'em?" Henley asked.

I told him it would be better for him if he remained ignorant of my business, and though he was disgruntled by this, after a brief bargaining session we agreed on a fee.

I had spent much of the previous week in Los Angeles, hiding from Siskin—I assumed he had discovered the ruin of the cabin and would want to talk with me—and working with a hacker who, using the 1-212-AKHITAI phone number as a starting point, put together a detailed picture of the project in Tuttle's Hollow. He had discovered that the project did not receive government funding—there were connections to the military, but these seemed unofficial, and the hacker's opinion was that we were dealing with a private organization with friends in the military. Twenty-one personnel were on-site, twelve of them high-priced private security. Twelve was not sufficient to patrol such a large perimeter, but I assumed they could rapidly deploy whenever an intruder registered on their monitors.

The rest of my time I spent studying the cylinders in Ariel's case and what I had learned gave me firm hope that I could penetrate their defenses. The four cylinders with clawed ends were key. One was a beacon that, if Ariel had chosen to use it in conjunction with the SETI radio telescope at Green Bank, would have enabled her to send out a distress call to any portion of the multiverse. The other three were weapons, the least destructive of which generated a rolling wave that would extinguish all life within a radius of two hundred yards, exempting a small safety zone at the center of the wave—this should be sufficient to handle the security force. That I was prepared to kill testified to an evolution of purposefulness only peripherally related to my obsessive personality. Ten days of accessing the cylinders, absorbing the memories of a mind not quite human, may have had some physiochemical effect and certainly was responsible for a psychological one. I was prone to strangely configured paranoias—I experienced, for instance, a stretch of several days during which I was convinced that if I were able to turn my head quickly enough, I would be able to catch a glimpse of my own face, and I had panicked moments when I was certain that another Isha was watching me, waiting to exact vengeance for the death of our analogue. My thoughts of Ariel were an environment whose functionary I had become and, thankfully, were less poignant in their impact than inspiriting. Distanced from her, I was distant from all things. Though my enhanced understanding of the multiverse allowed me to recognize the connectivity of all life, it also served to devalue it. Passion was in me, as were the concomitant emotions of longing and desire, but the character of my search was now colored by aggression. I fully intended to track her down. Nothing was going to stand in my way.

When we arrived at the streambed in late afternoon, Henley shook my hand and said, "Take care now, Professor. You too good a customer for me to lose." He lifted his hat, scratched his head. " 'Course maybe you ain't comin' back this way."

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"You have one of your feelings?" I asked.

"Just a bitty one. The bitty ones ain't always on the mark." He gave me an uncertain look. I thought he wanted to ask a question, but if so he left it unspoken and shouldered on his pack. "You know where to find me."

The task ahead suddenly seemed daunting and, anxious now that he was leaving, I tried to hold him there a while longer and made a lame joke about his returning to Mickey's to watch Mountaineer baseball.

"Baseball!" he said. "Shit, I don't watch no baseball. I just pray for football season to come." He adjusted the weight of his pack. "Even though it 'pears God don't give a damn 'bout what happens to the Mountaineers."

Walking along the streambed, its banks hedged by buzzing thickets, the air alive with a dusty vegetable freshness, I fell into an emotional rhythm, passing over and over again through a cycle of despondency to fatalism to grim determination, as if a wheel of fortune were turning in my head, offering three choices upon which an arrow of thought might land. Toward dusk, when the birds started a racket in the treetops, I cheered up a notch and conjured images of a happy result, picturing Ariel and me together, bypassing the interval between that possible future and the now; but with the coming of darkness that interval consumed me. As had always been the case since I'd become aware of Ariel, I was chasing flimsy clues and improbabilities. Knowing how to operate an Akashel vehicle would do me little good if there were no vehicles to be had in Tuttle's Hollow, and all that supported the notion that there were was the photograph of the dead man Siskin had shown me in New York. If a vehicle was to be had, was I then prepared to endure the violent transformation that waited at journey's end? Could I find Ariel? Would I be satisfied with someone almost her, a sister from a neighboring plane? I answered these questions with another question: What was I to do otherwise? Live? Write my idiot books? Build a tiny fire from the embers of our blaze and pretend to love its heat? The risks of a search were insignificant when compared to the crummy inevitability of accepting loss and moving on with things. I didn't want anything to be ordinary about Ariel and me, not even our ending.

Four miles out from the project I removed Ariel's gun and the four claw-ended cylinders from my pack. I had rigged a sling for the gun; I looped this over my shoulder, hid it beneath my jacket, and stuffed the pack beneath a bush, doubtful that I would need it again. I twisted the end of the first cylinder until it clicked twice and taped it to my palm. Holding death in my hand drew a curtain of black intent across my thoughts. I walked a mile or so with only a simple awareness of the world, noting sounds and movement, the suggestions of danger. A moonless dark replaced the dusk. I switched on a flashlight. After I had gone two more miles, well inside the perimeter Henley had described, I began to wonder why my presence hadn't been detected. They must be watching, I decided. Trying to decide whether I was an accidental or a purposeful intruder. Maybe they wouldn't approach at all, but would have a sniper take me out. I started shouting as I walked, identifying myself, calling to Paul Siskin, saying I had information for him. About fifty yards farther along, a voice hailed me, order-

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ing me to switch off the flashlight and stand still. I obeyed, wondering how close I had come to eating a bullet. Ahead and behind me, men were filtering out of the thickets. I could barely make them out at first. They were dressed in black and wore night vision goggles, which they soon removed. One shone a light in my face, blinding me as he came up, and said, "Mister Cyrus! Where have you been keeping yourself?"

Siskin.

Whatever reluctance I might have had about using the cylinder taped to my palm vanished when I heard his voice. It was he I blamed for everything—but for his attempted usage of me, I would still have Ariel. I hadn't really expected to find him there and I felt as if I had hit a trifecta at the racetrack.

"Surprised to see me?" He angled the light away from my eyes. "I'm not surprised to see you. Isha always comes after Ariel. Usually doesn't take so long. Guess she didn't set the hook real deep."

I couldn't tell how many men surrounded me, but it was close to the full complement. What Siskin had said, however, stayed my hand. I asked what he was talking about and he chuckled. "You haven't figured it out yet? Well, let's just say your situation is hardly unique. Don't you worry. I'll put you in the picture when we get back to base."

"Put me in the picture now."

He made a bemused sound and turned toward a man standing about ten feet away, perhaps to give an order; but as he turned I grabbed him around the neck, drew him close and thumbed the end of the cylinder—it emitted a double click. Siskin struggled, dropping his light, then went limp as the men around us slumped to the ground, into the stream, giving not a single outcry. I couldn't tell how they had been stricken and was grateful for that. All I felt was a sudden warmth, as if I'd come too close to a furnace; all I heard was a windy whistling—lasting for several seconds—as of someone imitating a ghostly breeze. I shoved Siskin to the ground and he went crawling toward the nearest of the fallen men. I covered him with Ariel's gun, told him not to get crazy, and picked up his light.

"What'd you do?" he asked shakily. "What in the fuck did you do?"

"Surprised?" I shone the light on him and showed him the cylinder. I caught sight of the dead man's face—except that the eyes were full of blood, gone to bright red ovals, it seemed unmarked. I felt an uneasy dwindling of spirit, the sense that I had done something so despicable as to attract God's anger.

Siskin came to his knees and shouted into the darkness, "Kill him! Kill him now!" No one responded to his command. He repeated it with greater desperation.

"Let's go," I told him.

As we made our way toward the hollow I interrogated Siskin about the project and what he knew concerning my situation. The hope of getting answers had been at the heart of the impulse that caused me to spare him; but either he was playing soldier or he simply didn't care. "You killed twelve of my men, you son of a bitch," he said when I asked why he wasn't surprised to see me. "Now you want me to chat with you?"

"You shouldn't have messed with us," I said.

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"I was just speeding you along. Whatever you were gonna do, you woulda done it sooner or later."

"That's not true. We . . ."

"All you fucking trans-multiversals do the same damn thing. You always fuck up." Anger or frustration, whatever he was feeling, acted to deepen his southern-fried accent. "Ever ask yourself, Cyrus, your Ariel's so in love with you and all, how come she didn't even hesitate to shoot you back at the cabin?"

"How do you know about that?"

"We were watching, asshole! You think we wouldn't?" He slowed his pace and I gave him a nudge with the gun. "You didn't buy all that bullshit I handed you in New York?"

"You couldn't have been watching close or you would have known what I was capable of."

"That was a glitch. We thought the destruction was caused by the other. We didn't know you had weapons."

"And here I thought you guys were experts. Cool and efficient professionals."

"You think a lotta things, Mister Cyrus, but apparently you don't think any of 'em through."

That was all he would tell me.

Though the slaughter of twelve men had been relatively sanitized and unaffecting, I couldn't pull the trigger on Siskin. Too personal, I guess. Or maybe I'd lost the mood. I recalled being agitated at the time I double-clicked the cylinder, a hurry-up-and-get through-this feeling such as you might experience when anticipating a dental injection. Now I was calmer, committed to the course, past the hard part, and I considered Siskin's question about why Ariel had not hesitated to shoot me. I could find no answer that made me happy and I asked Siskin for clarification. He trudged along without a word.

We climbed to the lip of the hollow and descended to the bunker. At the door Siskin paused and said, "There's a man just inside. He's unarmed. You don't have to kill him." In his voice was a depth of loathing, one that implied I was an insect whose habits revolted him.

I left the man inside gagged and shackled—Siskin provided the cuffs—and we proceeded to an elevator. Three levels below the surface we exited into a corridor with white plastic walls. On one were displayed thousands of small framed video captures, each depicting a male face, many of them inhuman; the more-or-less human among them were variations on what I once might have thought of as their original: me. On the opposite wall were thousands more, each containing a variation—some unrecognizably alien—on Ariel.

"You getting it yet?" Siskin asked.

I was beginning to think I might not want to know more than I already did and I made no comment. In the upper right corner of some of the screens that showed Ariel, a red digital dot flashed on and off. I asked Siskin the meaning of the dot.

"Terminated," he said. "The science boys'll fill you in. That should be fun for you."

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The corridor opened into a circular room about sixty feet across, its walls occupied by computer consoles and banks of monitors. Eight men were gathered at the far end, two sitting, the others leaning over the seated men's shoulders—they were watching one of the screens. They turned as we approached. They had mahogany skins and high cheekbones and black hair flowing over the collars of their lab coats. Their stares all had the same weight, the same inquisitive alertness. They were identical to one another and identical in every regard to my old friend, Rahul Osauri.

Siskin continued toward the men, engaged them in a muted conversation, but I stopped short, flabbergasted, thinking that I had been lied to about Rahul's death; but when none of the Rahuls smiled or greeted me, I understood who they were. I motioned to one, told him to come stand beside me. I herded Siskin and the rest into a room we had passed in the corridor and locked them in with Rahul's keys, and I escorted Rahul back to the circular room and sat with him by the consoles. The resemblance was uncanny. I could find no point of distinction between him and my memories.

"How are you feeling?" he asked; his quiet tenor had Rahul's East Indian accent.

"Freaked," I said.

"I mean physically."

I asked why he wanted to know.

"We think you may have made a crossing." He bent to the gun, peering at it. "Is this the weapon that caused the destruction at the cabin?"

"Yeah."

"Did you notice any changes in your environment after using it?"

"Yeah, matter of fact. Just little stuff."

He nodded. "The weapon must have created a slight backwash effect. I suppose it's intended as a weapon of last resort." He cut his eyes toward me. "It's nothing to worry about. You've only gone a step or two away from your home. You probably won't even notice the adaptation process."

I decided to postpone consideration of this new cause for alarm and deal with what lay before me. "Is your name Rahul?"

"Yes, of course."

I actually had the urge to hug him. "Jesus! This is ridiculous . . . what I'm feeling."

"Not at all. You and Ariel are lovers no matter where you begin your journey. It's the same for us. We're friends. We share pleasant memories." He smiled. "The strip club you took me to the night I arrived in Palo Alto."

"Dirty Birds."

"You see?"

"Remember the blonde you liked? You were so drunk, she gave you a lap dance and you proposed to her."

"It was a cultural thing, not drunkenness," Rahul said and smiled again. "As I recall, you were much drunker than I."

"Different universes," I said.

"That could explain it."

Though we were technically strangers, I wanted to sit and reminisce, to pretend our connection was real . . . and maybe it was real, as real as any

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connection. But I needed to know where I stood and what might happen. I asked what the mission of the project was.

"We're attempting to put an end to the proliferation of trans-multiversal travel," Rahul said. "We haven't come close to succeeding. Mostly we kill Ariels. Sometimes we kill Ishas, but Ariels are more dangerous. They habitually kill Ishas and then continue to travel across the Weave. We train Ishas to kill them."

I was almost as startled by his characterization of Ariel as I had been on seeing the Rahuls. I told him I had seen nothing to suggest this sort of essential antagonism in Ariel's books.

"Your wife's books are memories imperfectly rendered. Romantically rendered. You can't trust them."

"And I should trust you?"

"I admit I have an agenda. All you can do is listen and draw conclusions." Rahul settled himself more comfortably. "In the universe where you were born, you dropped out of Cal Tech and I died in a project whose instrumentality and direction were based upon your fundamental conceptions. In other universes, however, you finished your physics degree and met a woman named Ariel, whom you married. She was lovely, brilliant. Too domineering for my tastes. All three of us worked on the project and we succeeded in our work. You and Ariel had a violent falling out. The argument started over a project matter, but it seemed to acquire a life of its own. As if you'd been waiting for the chance to argue. In some cases it was your fault; in others it was hers. In almost every case, using the technology we created, Ariel fled and you followed."

He flipped a switch and all the monitors came alive with the myriad faces of Ariels and Ishas.

"This happened throughout the multiverse. For some reason the Ariels all fled toward. . . ." He paused, reflected. "For simplicity's sake, let's say toward the center of the multiverse. Toward one specific region. The Ishas followed. The stress of this concentrated travel broke down the barriers between certain universes. Some were affected catastrophically, thus weakening the underlying structure of all things. What your wife called the Weave. The problem has developed not only because of the millions of initial flights and pursuits. Most Ariels continue to flee, making multiple journeys, and Ishas continue to hunt them. New Ishas and Ariels are wakened to the chase . . . as with you. The stories of each couple vary to a degree, but they're basically the same. Both Ariel and Isha are obsessed in their own fashion. Obsessed to the point of insanity in some instances. It's as if they're engaged in an archetypal dance. Yin and Yang. Kali and Shiva. The creative and the receptive. The Battle of the Sexes. In every culture there are a thousand metaphors for their conflict."

I had no idea what my face was showing, but Rahul seemed to derive satisfaction from what he saw there.

"Those of us trying to inhibit the conflict," he went on, "have taken the names Akhitai and Akashel. Akhitai is the word for 'man' in one of the multiversal languages. Akashel means 'woman.' The Akashel believe the conflict can best be resolved by the elimination of Ishas. We believe the opposite. Though Ishas are relentless in their pursuit, rarely do they per-

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ceive Ariel as a threat. Their attitudes are colored by affection. Though Ariels are generally considered the more gentle and nurturing, fear motivates them to use deadly force far more often than is the case with Ishas. If a deadly weapon had fallen to your wife's hand during her moment of fear, when she recognized on a subconscious level that you were a mortal enemy, she would have killed you. It's possible her original mission was to kill you . . . you specifically. That she was traveling to California to meet you and not the Isha with whom you fought."

I was incredulous. "You're saying it's just her and me? We're the ones causing all the damage?"

"I'm sorry, but . . . yes."

"That's crazy!"

"It is as it is," said Rahul.

"If it's true, why not send operatives to kill us all?"

"How many operatives should we send? Millions? There are at least that number of trans-multiversal Ishas and Ariels. So many more journeys might destroy the Weave. A few of us make journeys by necessity, but it's safer to train Ishas and Ariels to kill one another. The method's not terribly efficient, I'm afraid. We're spread too thin. We don't have the resources we need and so we make mistakes . . . like the one we apparently made with you." He brushed aside a forelock. "There's another figure in the dance, of course. Me. Every outpost of the Akashel and the Akhitai is manned by at least one of my analogues. I'm in conflict with myself." He gave a disconsolate laugh. "The three of us make a curious trinity."

I wanted to reject his words, but everything he said seemed to connect with a truth I carried inside me. Though it was difficult to think of myself and Ariel as a host of sexually deranged termites eating holes in the multiversal equilibrium, once that image had been invoked, it was impossible to erase. Rahul enumerated my choices. I could return to my life and stay away from women named Ariel . . . but it was probable that an Ariel programmed to kill Ishas would seek me out. I could let them train me and become a predator whose prey was the woman I loved in all her incarnations. Or I could go my own way, take one of the vehicles they had acquired and pursue Ariel for my own reasons. Rahul recommended Number Two. My feelings for him had dwindled—he seemed imbued with the horrifying impersonality of our enfolding circumstance—and I locked him in with Siskin and the others. Thereafter I strolled about the circular room, studying the infinite variety of my lover's faces, finding no better answers there.

There was a fourth choice, one that Rahul had not mentioned, and during the hours of the night I contemplated self-destruction; but as I have stated, I am a hero in only the structural sense of the term. My life is precious to me and the portrait painted by Rahul of the damage my analogues had wrought—universes destroyed, an unimaginable apocalypse looming—made it no less precious. Hungry, I found a kitchen adjoining the circular room and fixed a chicken sandwich and drank an entire pot of coffee. After eating I stretched out on a stainless steel prep table to rest and remembered something Rahul had said years before. We had been talking about the fragility of the human body, how the slightest chemical imbalance, one milli-fraction less of a compound, could result in death,

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and he suggested the universe itself was endowed with a similar fragility. "Everything is in balance," he said. "A nudge from the perfect angle and it would all topple." It appeared in this he had essentially been correct.

Wired on stress and caffeine, I closed my eyes and was possessed by fragments of thought, fleeting images, memories, all relating to Ariel. Obsessed to the point of insanity. I would not have believed that I could be so described, yet I had snuffed twelve men without much in the way of a reaction and I had been planning without regard for human consequence to destroy the project and all in it with the remaining cylinders. Such indifference surely qualified as insanity. I had a waking dream in which I traveled to a distant place and sought out Ariel, convinced her of my loyalty, and together we spread an evangel of love throughout the multiverse, healing the breach between all Ishas and Ariels. Even in my disturbed state I knew this to be insane. I would never be able to look at Ariel again without feeling wary, mistrustful. I hatched a dozen plans, none of them practical. Of one thing I was certain—I could not return to my life. With suicide off the board, I was left with two choices: search for Ariel with my own interests in mind or come seething out of nowhere, a monstrous anomaly like Springheel Jack, to hunt her and her kind. The choices were much the same. Better said, I really had one choice. And no matter what I intended, I hadn't the slightest notion of how I might act if I saw Ariel again. I believed more firmly than ever that the Willowy Woman had chosen forgetfulness over duty, because that was what I most desired for myself—to forget everything, to be ignorant and open to hope, unaware of the universe being eaten away beneath my feet and of my role in the process.

I jumped down from the table and went to explore the basements of the project. I told myself I was looking for one of the Akashel vehicles, but what I was truly looking for was a reason to act in some direction. Two levels below the kitchen I came upon a room containing five of the vehicles. Farther along was a room with a window in which a woman sat on the floor, her chin resting on her drawn-up knees. She was facing away from me, clad in a gray jumpsuit, her black hair short and neatly trimmed; but even before she stood and approached the window, I knew she was Ariel. Not my Ariel, but mine all the same. She greatly resembled the Willowy Woman. Tall and slender, with sharply angled eyebrows and that streamlined, too-simple beauty. Judging by her well-kept hair, I might have assumed that she'd been captured recently; but it was as likely that they had been studying her, caring for her, watching her change from a spindly, hissing creature, growing smaller, curvier, emptier. The window must have been a two-way mirror. It was clear she could not see me, but she was aware of me—that, too, was clear. She laid her palm on the glass and tilted her head, trying to find me behind her reflection. All I had felt on meeting the Willowy Woman years before was restored to me. Curiosity. Wonder. But these feelings were pushed to the side by the stronger emotions I had known in New York and California, and despite the bizarre condition that joined us, it seemed natural that I felt this way. I must have tried twenty keys before I hit upon the one that fit the lock. I opened the door and stepped back, uncertain whether she would know

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me; and if she did know me, how could I trust that her knowledge was not married to homicidal intent?

She slipped from the room and moved off a short ways, walking with that weird gliding step. I had a whiff of an unpleasant odor, but it was less intense than it had been with the Willowy Woman. She stopped, stared at me, and edged nearer. A line of perplexity creased her brow. She lifted a hand as if to point at me, a gesture half-completed. "Isha?" she said. I spoke her name, or its approximation, and the line on her forehead deepened. She apparently wasn't able to link the name with an identity. Which meant she had been imprisoned long enough to dissolve the memory of her purpose. She glanced in both directions along the corridor and I realized she must not recall the way out. I led her to the elevator. As we ascended she pressed herself into a corner as far away as possible, watching my every shift in posture. I carried the gun barrel-down, but was prepared to use it. Outside the bunker, standing at the bottom of the hollow, she scented the air and scanned the sky, pricked here and there by dim stars. Occasionally her eyes darted toward me, as if she had lost track and was checking to see whether or not I was still there.

The things she had forgotten, a different sky, different tastes, different musics, and the things she could not forget, surviving in her as instinct and dream . . . I wanted to watch her change, to guide that change, to walk with her in the West Virginia woods and give her the knowledge by which she could overcome her innate fears. I wanted to illuminate the past, demonstrate that its hold on us was breakable, and then we might be able to live. But I didn't believe we could escape our natures or our fate. She had to go her own path and I had to return to mine. Having seen her again, I thought now I could relinquish her and abandon the world to the Siskins and the Rahuls. I'd find another country in which to forget her . . . or perhaps that would require another universe.

I waved at the rim of the hollow, telling her with that sign and a harsh shout to go. Reluctantly, she walked away, and then she ran, her supple stride carrying her a hundred feet toward the sky in no more time than it would have taken me to turn and go back inside the bunker. Halfway up the slope, she stopped. She was scarcely more than a shadow at that distance, but I felt her eyes on me. She cried out, "Isha!" in a voice both pleading and demanding. The connection between us was palpable, a tension stretched to the breaking point—intimations of emotion seemed to course along it. She stood awhile longer, then turned and sprinted for the rim. The connection was broken, shocking my heart. After the briefest of hesitations, abandoning all my resolve, compelled by things I knew and things I could never know, I followed. O

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THE HYDROGEN WALL

Gregory Benford

The author's next two books will both be published in March 2004. His novel, *Beyond Infinity,* will be out from Warner and his nonfiction work, *More than Human,* which he wrote with Elisabeth Malartre, will be released from Tor. Dr. Benford is a professor of physics and astronomy at the University of California, Irvine.

Hidden wisdom and hidden treasure—of what use is either?
—Ecclesiasticus 20:30

"Your ambition?" The Prefect raised an eyebrow.

She had not expected such a question. "To, uh, translate. To learn." It sounded lame to her ears, and his disdainful scowl showed that he had expected some such rattled response. Very well then, be more assertive. "Particularly, if I may, from the Sagittarius Architecture."

This took the Prefect's angular face by surprise, though he quickly covered by pursing his leathery mouth. "That is an ancient problem. Surely you do not expect that a Trainee could make headway in such a classically difficult challenge."

"I might," she shot back crisply. "Precisely because it's so well documented."

"Centuries of well-marshalled inquiry have told us very little of the Sagittarius Architecture. It is a specimen from the highest order of Sentient Information, and will not reward mere poking around."

"Still, I'd like a crack at it."

"A neophyte—"

"May bring a fresh perspective."

They both knew that by tradition at the Library, incoming candidate Librarians could pick their first topic. Most deferred to the reigning conventional wisdom and took up a small Message, something from a Type I Civilization just coming onto the galactic stage. Something resembling

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what Earth had sent out in its first efforts. To tackle a really big problem was foolhardy.

But some smug note in the Prefect's arrogant gaze had kindled an old desire in her.

He sniffed. "To merely review previous thinking would take a great deal of time."

She leaned forward in her chair. "I have studied the Sagittarius for years. It became something of a preoccupation of mine."

"Ummm." She had little experience with people like this. The Prefect was strangely austere in his unreadable face, the even tones of his neutral sentences. Deciphering him seemed to require the same sort of skills she had fashioned through years of training. But at the moment she felt only a yawning sense of her inexperience, amplified by the stretching silence in this office. The Prefect could be right, after all. She started to phrase a gracious way to back down.

The Prefect made a small sound, something like a sigh. "Very well. Report weekly."

She blinked. "Um, many thanks."

Ruth Angle smoothed her ornate, severely traditional Trainee shift as she left the Prefect's office, an old calming gesture she could not train away. Now her big mouth had gotten her into a fix, and she could see no way out. Not short of going back in there and asking for his guidance, to find a simpler Message, something she could manage.

To hell with that. The soaring, fluted alabaster columns of the Library Centrex reminded her of the majesty of this entire enterprise, stiffening her resolve.

There were few other traditional sites, here at the edge of the Fourth Millennium, that could approach the grandeur of the Library. Since the first detection of signals from other galactic civilizations nearly a thousand years before, no greater task had confronted humanity than the learning of such vast lore.

The Library itself had come to resemble its holdings: huge, aged, mysterious in its shadowy depths. In the formal grand pantheon devoted to full-color, moving statues of legendary Interlocutors, giving onto the Seminar Plaza, stood the revered block of black basalt: the Rosetta Stone, symbol of all they worked toward. Its chiseled face was nearly three millennia old, and, she thought as she passed it, endearingly easy to understand. It was a simple linear, one-to-one mapping of three human languages, found by accident. Having the same text in Greek II, which the discoverers could read, meant that the hieroglyphic pictures and cursive Demotic forms could be deduced. This battered black slab, found by troops clearing ground to build a fort, had linked civilizations separated by millennia.

She reached out a trembling palm to caress its chilly hard sleekness. The touch brought a thrill. They who served here were part of a grand, age-old tradition, one that went to the heart of the very meaning of being human.

Only the lightness of her ringing steps buoyed her against the grave atmosphere of the tall, shadowy vaults. Scribes passed silently among the

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palisades, their violet robes swishing after them. She was noisy and new, and she knew it.

She had come down from low lunar orbit the day before, riding on the rotating funicular, happy to rediscover Luna's ample domes and obliging gravity. Her earliest training had been here, and then the mandatory two years on Earth. The Councilors liked to keep a firm hold on who ran the Library, so the final scholastic work had to be in bustling, focal point Australia, beside foaming waves and tawny beaches. Luna was a more solemn place, unchanging.

She savored the stark ivory slopes of craters in the distance as she walked in the springy gait of one still adjusting to the gravity.

Sagittarius, here I come.

Her next and most important appointment was with the Head Nought. She went through the usual protocols, calling upon lesser lights, before being ushered into the presence of Siloh, a smooth-skinned Nought who apparently had not learned to smile. Or maybe that went with the cellular territory; Noughts had intricate adjustments to offset their deeply sexless natures.

"I do hope you can find a congruence with the Sagittarius Architecture," Siloh said in a flat tone that ended each sentence with a purr. "Though I regret your lost effort."

"Lost?"

"You will fail, of course."

"Perhaps a fresh approach—"

"So have said many hundreds of candidate scholars. I remind you of our latest injunction from the Councilors—the heliosphere threat."

"I thought there was little anyone could do."

"So it seems." Siloh scowled. "But we cannot stop from striving."

"Of course not," she said in what she hoped was a demure manner. She was aware of how little she could make of this person, who gave off nothing but sentences.

Noughts had proven their many uses centuries before. Their lack of sexual appetites and apparatus, both physical and mental, gave them a rigorous objectivity. As diplomats, Contractual Savants, and neutral judges, they excelled. They had replaced much of the massive legal apparatus that had come to burden society in earlier centuries.

The Library could scarcely function without their insights. Alien texts did not carry unthinking auras of sexuality, as did human works. Or more precisely, the Messages might carry alien sexualities aplenty, however much their original creators had struggled to make them objective and transparent. Cutting through that was a difficult task for ordinary people, such as herself. The early decades of the Library had struggled with the issue, and the Noughts had solved it.

Translating the Messages from a human male or female perspective profoundly distorted their meaning. In the early days, this had beclouded many translations. Much further effort had gone to cleansing these earlier texts. Nowadays, no work issued from the Library without a careful Nought vetting, to erase unconscious readings.

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Siloh said gravely, "The heliosphere incursion has baffled our finest minds. I wish to approach it along a different path. For once, the Library may be of immediate use."

Ruth found this puzzling. She had been schooled in the loftier aspects of the Library's mission, its standing outside the tides of the times. Anyone who focused upon Messages that had been designed for eternity had to keep a mental distance from the events of the day. "I do not quite . . ."

"Think of the Library as the uninitiated do. They seldom grasp the higher functions we must perform, and instead see mere passing opportunity. That is why we are bombarded with requests to view the Vaults as a source for inventions, tricks, novelties."

"And reject them, as we should." She hoped she did not sound too pious.

But Siloh nodded approvingly. "Indeed. My thinking is that an ancient society such as the Sagittarius Architecture might have encountered such problems before. It would know better than any of our astro-engineers how to deal with the vast forces at work."

"I see." *And why didn't I think of it? Too steeped in this culture of hushed reverence for the sheer magnitude of the Library's task?* "Uh, it is difficult for me to envision how—"

"Your task is not to imagine but to perceive," Siloh said severely.

She found Noughts disconcerting, and Siloh more so. Most chose to have no hair, but Siloh sported a rim of kinked coils, glinting like brass, as if a halo had descended onto his skull. His pale eyelashes flicked seldom, gravely. Descending, his eyelids looked pink and rubbery. The nearly invisible blond eyebrows arched perpetually, so his every word seemed layered with artifice, tones sliding among syllables with resonant grace. His face shifted from one nuanced expression to another, a pliable medium in ceaseless movement, like the surface of a restless pond rippled by unfelt winds. She felt as though she should be taking notes about his every utterance. Without blinking, she shifted to recording mode, letting her spine-based memory log everything that came in through eyes and ears. Just in case.

"I have not kept up, I fear," she said; it was always a good idea to appear humble. "The incursion—"

"Has nearly reached Jupiter's orbit," Siloh said. The wall behind the Nought lit with a display showing the sun, gamely plowing through a gale of interstellar gas.

Only recently had humanity learned that it had arisen in a benign time. An ancient supernova had once blown a bubble in the interstellar gas, and Earth had been cruising through that extreme vacuum while the mammals evolved from tree shrews to big-brained world-conquerers. Not that the sun was special in any other way. In its gyre about the galaxy's hub, it moved only fifty light years in the span of a million years, oscillating in and out of the galaxy's plane every thirty-three million years—and that was enough to bring it now out of the Local Bubble's protection. The full density of interstellar hydrogen now beat against the Sun's own plasma wind, pushing inward, hammering into the realm of the fragile planets.

"The hydrogen wall began to bombard the Ganymede Colony yester-

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day," Siloh said with the odd impartiality Ruth still found unnerving, as though not being male or female gave it a detached view, above the human fray. "We at the Library are instructed to do all we can to find knowledge bearing upon our common catastrophe."

The wall screen picked up this hint and displayed Jupiter's crescent against the hard stars. Ruth watched as a fresh flare coiled back from the ruby, roiling shock wave that embraced Jupiter. The bow curve rippled with colossal turbulence, vortices bigger than lesser worlds. "Surely we can't change the interstellar weather."

"We must try. The older Galactics may know of a world that survived such an onslaught."

The sun's realm, the heliosphere, had met the dense clump of gas and plasma eighty-eight years before. Normally the solar wind particles blown out from the sun kept the interstellar medium at bay. For many past millinnia, these pressures had struggled against each other in a filmy barrier a hundred Astronomical Units beyond the cozy inner solar system. Now the barrier had been pressed back in, where the outer planets orbited.

The wall's view expanded to show what remained of the comfy realm dominated by the Sun's pressure. It looked like an ocean-going vessel, seen from above: bow waves generated at the prow rolled back, forming the characteristic parabolic curve.

Under the steadily rising pressure of the thickening interstellar gas and dust, that pressure front eroded. The sun's course slammed it against the dense hydrogen wall at sixteen kilometers per second and its puny wind was pressed back into the realm of solar civilization. Pluto's Cryo Base had been abandoned decades before, and Saturn only recently. The incoming hail of high energy particles and fitful storms had killed many. The Europa Ocean's strange life was safe beneath its ten kilometers of ice, but that was small consolation.

"But what can we do on our scale?" she insisted.

"What we can."

"The magnetic turbulence alone, at the bow shock, holds a larger energy store than all our civilization."

Siloh gave her a look that reminded her of how she had, as a girl, watched an insect mating dance. Distant distaste. "We do not question here. We listen."

"Yes, Self." This formal title, said to be preferred by Noughts to either Sir or Madam, seemed to please Siloh. It went through the rest of their interview with a small smile, and she could almost feel a personality beneath its chilly remove. Almost.

She left the Executat Dome with relief. The Library sprawled across the Locutus Plain, lit by Earth's stunning crescent near a jagged white horizon. Beneath that preserved plain lay the cryofiles of all transmissions received from the Galactic Complex, the host of innumerable societies that had flourished long before humanity was born. A giant, largely impenetrable resource. The grandest possible intellectual scrap heap.

Libraries were monuments not so much to the Past, but to Permanence itself. Ruth shivered with anticipation. She had passed through her first

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interviews!—and was now free to explore the myriad avenues of the galactic past. The Sagittarius was famous for its density of information, many-layered and intense. A wilderness, beckoning.

Still, she had to deal with the intricacies of the Library, too. These now seemed as steeped in arcane byways and bureaucratic labyrinths as were the Library's vast contents. Ruth cautioned herself to be careful, and most especially, to not let her impish side show. She bowed her head as she passed an aged Nought, for practice.

The greatest ancient library had been at Alexandria, in Afrik. An historian had described the lot of librarians there with envy: *They had a carefree life: free meals, high salaries, no taxes to pay, very pleasant surroundings, good lodgings, and servants. There was plenty of opportunity for quarreling with each other.*

So not much had changed. . . .

Her apartment mate was a welcome antidote to the Nought. Small, bouncy, Catkejen was not the usual image of a librarian candidate. She lounged around in a revealing sarong, sipping a stimulant that was scarcely allowed in the Trainee Manual.

"Give 'em respect," she said off-hand, "but don't buy into all their solemn dignity-of-our-station stuff. You'll choke on it after a while."

Ruth grinned. "And get slapped down."

"I kinda think the Librarians *like* some back talk. Keeps 'em in fighting trim."

"Where are you from?—Marside?"

"They're too mild for me. No, I'm a Ganny."

"Frontier stock, eh?" Ruth sprawled a little herself, a welcome relief from the ramrod-spine posture the Librarians kept. No one hunched over their work here in the classic scholar's pose. They kept upright, using the surround enviros. "Buried in ice all your life?"

"Don't you buy that." Catkejen waved a dismissive hand, extruding three tool-fingers to amplify the effect. "We get out to prospect the outer moons a lot."

"So you're wealthy? Hiding behind magneto shields doesn't seem worth it."

"More clichés. Not every Ganny strikes it rich."

The proton sleet at Ganymede was lethal, but the radiation-cured elements of the inner Jovian region had made many a fortune, too. "So you're from the poor folks who had to send their brightest daughter off?"

"Another cliché." Catkejen made a face. "I hope you have better luck finding something original in—what was it?"

"The Sagittarius Architecture."

"*Brrrrr!* I heard it was a hydra."

"Each time you approach it, you get a different mind?"

"If you can call it a mind. I hear it's more like a talking body."

Ruth had read and sensed a lot about the Sagittarius, but this was new. They all knew that the mind-body duality made no sense in dealing with alien consciousness, but how this played out was still mysterious. She frowned.

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Catkejen poked her in the ribs. "Come on, no more deep thought today! Let's go for a fly in the high-pressure dome."

Reluctantly, Ruth went. But her attention still fidgeted over the issues. She thought about the challenge to come, even as she swooped in a long, serene glide over the fern-covered hills under the amusement dome, beneath the stunning ring of orbital colonies that made a glittering necklace in the persimmon sky.

Into her own pod, at last!

She had gone through a week of final neural conditioning since seeing Siloh, and now the moment had arrived: direct line feed from the Sagittarius Architecture.

Her pod acted as a neural web, using her entire body to convey connections. Sheets of sensation washed over her skin, a prickly itch began in her feet.

She felt a heady kinesthetic rush of acceleration as a constellation of fusions drew her to a tight nexus. Alien architectures used most of the available human input landscape. Dizzying surges in the ears, biting smells, ringing cacophonies of elusive patterns, queasy perturbations of the inner organs—a Trainee had to know how these might convey meaning.

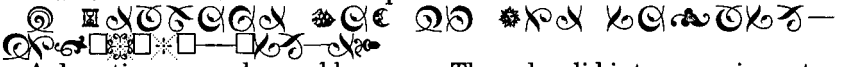
They often did, but translating them was elusive. After such experiences, one never thought of human speech as anything more than a hobbled, claustrophobic mode. Its linear meanings and frail attempts at linked concepts were simple, utilitarian, and typical of younger minds.

The greatest task was translating the dense smatterings of mingled sensations into discernible sentences. Only thus could a human fathom them at all, even in a way blunted and blurred. Or so much previous scholarly experience said.

Ruth felt herself bathed in a shower of penetrating responses, all coming from her own body. These were her own in-board subsystems coupled with high-bit-rate spatterings of meaning—guesses, really. She had an ample repository of built-in processing units, lodged in her spine and shoulders. No one would attempt such a daunting task without artificial amplifications. To confront such slabs of raw data with a mere unaided human mind was pointless and quite dangerous. Early Librarians, centuries before, had perished in a microsecond's exposure to such layered labyrinths as the Sagittarius.

Years of scholarly training had conditioned her against the jagged ferocity of the link, but still she felt a cold shiver of dread. That, too, she had to wait to let pass. The effect amplified whatever neural state you brought to it. Legend had it that a Librarian had once come to contact while angry, and been driven into a fit from which he'd never recovered. They had found the body peppered everywhere with micro-contusions.

The raw link was as she had expected:



A daunting, many-layered language. Then she slid into an easier notation that went through her spinal interface, and heard/felt/read:

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Much more intelligible, but still. . . . She concentrated—

We wish you greetings, new sapience.

"Hello. I come with reverence and new supple offerings." This was the standard opening, one refined over five centuries ago and never changed by so much as a syllable.

And you offer?

"Further cultural nuances." Also a ritual promise, however unlikely it was to be fulfilled. Few advances into the Sagittarius had been made in the last century. Even the most ambitious Librarians seldom tried any longer.

Something like mirth came wafting to her, then:

We are of a mind to venture otherwise with you.

Damn! There was no record of such a response before, her downlink confirmed. It sounded like a preliminary to a dismissal. That overture had worked fine for the last six Trainees. But then, they hadn't gotten much farther, either, before the Sagittarius lost interest and went silent again. Being ignored was the greatest insult a Trainee faced, and the most common. Humans were more than a little boring to advanced intelligences. The worst of it was that one seldom had an idea why.

So what in hell did this last remark from it mean? Ruth fretted, speculated, and then realized that her indecision was affecting her own neural states. She decided to just wing it. "I am open to suggestion and enlightenment."

A pause, getting longer as she kept her breathing steady. Her meditative cues helped, but could not entirely submerge her anxieties. Maybe she had bitten off entirely too much—

From Sagittarius she received a jittering cascade, resolving to:

As a species you are technologically gifted yet philosophically callow, a common condition among emergent intelligences. But of late it is your animal property of physical expression that intrigues. Frequently you are unaware of your actions—which makes them all the more revealing.

"Oh?" She sat back in her pod and crossed her legs. The physical pose might help her mental profile, in the global view of the Sagittarius. Until now its responses had been within conventional bounds; this last was new.

You concentrate so hard upon your linear word groups that you forget how your movements, postures and facial cues give you away.

"What am I saying now, then?"

That you must humor Us until you can ask your questions about the heliosphere catastrophe.

Ruth laughed. It felt good. "I'm that obvious?"

Many societies We know only through their bit-strings and abstractions. That is the

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nature of binary signals. You on the other hand (to use a primate phrase), We can know through your unconscious self.

"You want to know about *me?*"

We have heard enough symphonies, believe Us.

At least it was direct. Many times in the past, her research showed, it—"They"—had not been. The Architecture was paying attention!—a coup in itself.

"I'm sorry our art forms bore you."

Many beings who use acoustic means believe their art forms are the most important, valuable aspects of their minds. This is seldom so, in Our experience.

"So involvement is more important to you?"

For this moment, truly. Remember that we are an evolving composite of mental states, no less than you. You cannot meet the same Us again.

"Then you should be called. . . ?"

We know your term 'Architecture' and find it—your phrasing?—amusing. Better perhaps to consider us to be a composite entity. As you are yourselves, though you cannot sense this aspect. You imagine that you are a unitary consciousness, guiding your bodies.

"And we aren't?"

Of course not. Few intelligences in Our experience know as little of their underlying mental architecture as do you.

"Could that be an advantage for us?"

With the next words came a shooting sensation, something like a dry chuckle.

Perhaps so. You apparently do all your best work off stage. Ideas appear to you without your knowing where they come from.

She tried to imagine watching her own thoughts, but was at a loss where to go with this. "Then let's . . . well . . ."

Gossip?

What an odd word choice. There was something like a tremor of pleasure in its neural tone, resounding with long, slow wavelengths within her.

"It sounds creepy," Catkejen said. She was shoveling in food at the Grand Cafeteria, a habit Ruth had noticed many Gannies had.

"Nothing in my training really prepared me for its . . . well, coldness, and . . ."

Catkejen stopped eating to nod knowingly. "And intimacy?"

"Well, yes."

"Look, I've been doing pod work only a few weeks, just like you. Already it's pretty clear that we're mostly negotiating, not translating."

Ruth frowned. "They warned us, but still. . . ."

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"Look, these are big minds. Strange as anything we'll ever know. But they're trapped in a small space, living cyber-lives. We're their entertainment."

"And I am yours, ladies," said a young man as he sat down at their table. He ceremoniously shook hands. "Geoffrey Chandis."

"So how're you going to amuse us?" Catkejen smiled skeptically.

"How's this?" Geoffrey stood and put one hand on their table. In one deft leap he was upside down, balanced upon the one hand, the other saluting them.

"You're from HiGee." Catkejen applauded.

He switched his support from one hand to the other. "I find this paltry 0.19 Lunar gee charming, don't you?"

Ruth pointed. "As charming as one red sock, the other blue?"

Unfazed, Geoffrey launched himself upward. He did a flip and landed on two feet, without even a backward step to restore balance. Ruth and Catkejen gave him beaming smiles. "Socks are just details, ladies. I stick to essentials."

"You're in our year, right?" Catkejen asked. "I saw you at the opening day ceremonies."

Geoffrey sat, but not before he twirled his chair up into the air, making it do a few quick, showy moves. "No, I was just sneaking in for some of the refreshments. I'm a lordly year beyond you two."

Ruth said, "I thought HiGee folk were, well—"

"More devoted to the physical? Not proper fodder for the Library?" He grinned.

Ruth felt her face redden. Was she that easy to read? "Well, yes."

"My parents, my friends, they're all focused on athletics. Me, I'm a rebel."

Catkejen smiled. "Even against the Noughts?"

He shrugged. "Mostly I find a way to go around them."

Ruth nodded. "I think I'd rather be ignored by them."

"Y'know," Catkejen said reflectively, "I think they're a lot like the Minds."

Ruth asked slowly, "Because they're the strangest form of human?"

Geoffrey said, "They're sure alien to me. I'll give up sex when I've lost all my teeth, maybe, but not before."

"They give me the shivers sometimes," Catkejen said. "I was fetching an ancient written document over in the Hard Archives last week, nighttime. Three of them came striding down the corridor in those capes with the cowls. All in black, of course. I ducked into a side corridor—they scared me."

"A woman's quite safe with them," Geoffrey said. "Y'know, when they started up their Nought Guild business, centuries back, they decided on that all-black look and the shaved heads and all, because it saved money. But everybody read it as dressing like funeral directors. Meaning, they were going to bury all our sex-ridden, old ways of interpreting."

"And here I thought I knew a lot about Library history," Catkejen said in an admiring tone. "Wow, that's good gossip."

"But they've made the big breakthroughs," Ruth said. "Historically—"

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"Impossible to know, really," Catkejen said. "The first Noughts refused to even have names, so we can't cite the work as coming from them."

Geoffrey said mock-solemnly, "Their condition they would Nought name."

"They've missed things, too," Catkejen said. "Translated epic sensual poems as if they were about battles, when they were about love."

"Sex, actually," Geoffrey said. "Which can seem like a battle."

Catkejen laughed. "Not the way *I* do it."

"Maybe you're not doing it right." Geoffrey laughed with her, a ringing peal.

"Y'know, I wonder if the Noughts ever envy us?"

Geoffrey grunted in derision. "They save so much time by not having to play our games. It allows them to contemplate the Messages at their leah-zure."

He took a coffee cup and made it do a few impossible stunts in midair. Ruth felt that if she blinked she would miss something; he was *quick*. His compact body had a casual grace, despite the thick slabs of muscle. The artful charm went beyond the physical. His words slid over each other in an odd pronunciation that had just enough inflection to ring musically. Maybe, she thought, there were other amusements to be had here in the hallowed Library grounds.

She worked steadily, subjecting each microsecond of her interviews with the Architecture to elaborate contextual analysis. Codes did their work, cross-checking furiously across centuries of prior interpretation. But they needed the guidance of the person who had been through the experience: her.

And she felt the weight of the Library's history upon her every translation. Each cross-correlation with the huge body of Architecture research brought up the immense history behind their entire effort.

When first received centuries before, the earliest extraterrestrial signals had been entirely mystifying. The initial celebrations and bold speeches had obscured this truth, which was to become the most enduring fact about the field.

For decades the searchers for communications had rummaged through the frequencies, trying everything from radio waves to optical pulses, and even the occasional foray into X-rays. They found nothing. Conventional wisdom held that the large power needed to send even a weak signal across many light years was the most important fact. Therefore, scrutinize the nearby stars, cupping electromagnetic ears for weak signals from penny-pinching civilizations. The odds were tiny that a society interested in communication would be nearby, but this was just one of those hard facts about the cosmos—which turned out to be wrong.

The local-lookers fell from favor after many decades of increasingly frantic searches. By then the Galactic Center Strategy had emerged. Its basis lay in the discovery that star formation had begun in the great hub of stars within the innermost ten thousand light years. Supernovas had flared early and often there, stars were closer together, so heavy elements built up quickly. Three-quarters of the suitable life-supporting stars in

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the entire galaxy were older than the Sun, and had been around on average more than a billion years longer.

Most of these lay within the great glowing central bulge—the hub, which we could not see through the lanes of dust clogging the constellation of Sagittarius. But in radio frequencies, the center shone brightly. And the entire company of plausible life sites, where the venerable societies might dwell, subtended an arc of only a few degrees, as seen from Earth.

We truly lived in the boondocks—physically, and as became apparent, conceptually as well.

Near the center of the hub, thousands of stars swarmed within a single light year. Worlds there enjoyed a sky with dozens of stars brighter than the full moon. Beautiful, perhaps—but no eyes would ever evolve there to witness the splendor.

The dense center was dangerous. Supernovas drove shock waves through fragile solar systems. Protons sleeted down on worlds, sterilizing them. Stars swooped near each other, scrambling up planetary orbits and raining down comets upon them. The inner zone was a dead zone.

But a bit further out, the interstellar weather was better. Planets capable of sustaining organic life began their slow winding path upward toward life and intelligence within the first billion or two years after the galaxy formed. An Earthlike world that took 4.5 billion years to produce smart creatures would have done so about four billion years ago.

In that much time, intelligence might have died out, arisen again, and gotten inconceivably rich. The beyond-all-reckoning wealthy beings near the center could afford to lavish a pittance on a luxury—blaring their presence out to all those crouched out in the galactic suburbs, just getting started in the interstellar game.

Whatever forms dwelled further in toward the center, they knew the basic symmetry of the spiral. This suggested that the natural corridor for communication is along the spiral's radius, a simple direction known to everyone. This maximized the number of stars within a telescope's view. A radius is better than aiming along a spiral arm, since the arm curves away from any straight-line view. So a beacon should broadcast outward in both directions from near the center.

So, rather than look nearby, the ancient Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence searchers began to look inward. They pointed their antennas in a narrow angle toward the constellation Sagittarius. They listened for the big spenders to shout at the less prosperous, the younger, the unsophisticated.

But how often to cup an ear? If Earth was mediocre, near the middle in planetary properties, then its day and year were roughly typical. These were the natural ranges any world would follow: a daily cycle atop an annual sway of climate.

If aliens were anything like us, they might then broadcast for a day, once a year. But which day? There was no way to tell—so the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence searchers began to listen *every* day, for roughly a half hour, usually as the radio astronomers got all their instruments calibrated. They watched for narrow-band signals that stood out even against the bright hub's glow.

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Radio astronomers had to know what frequency to listen to, as well. The universe is full of electromagnetic noise at all wavelengths from the size of atoms to those of planets. Quite a din.

There was an old argument that water-based life might pick the "watering hole"—a band near 1 billion cycles/second where both water and hydroxyl molecules radiate strongly. Maybe not right on top of those signals, but nearby, because that's also in the minimum of all the galaxy's background noise.

Conventional Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence had spent a lot of effort looking for nearby sources, shifting to their rest frame, and then eavesdropping on certain frequencies in that frame. But a beacon strategy could plausibly presume that the rest frame of the galactic center was the obvious gathering spot, so anyone broadcasting would choose a frequency near the "watering hole" frequency of the galaxy's exact center.

Piggy-backing on existing observing agendas, astronomers could listen to a billion stars at once. Within two years, the strategy worked. One of the first beacons found was from the Sagittarius Architecture.

Most of the signals proved to have a common deep motivation. Their ancient societies, feeling their energies ebb, yet treasuring their trove of accumulated art, wisdom and insight, wanted to pass this on. Not just by leaving it in a vast museum somewhere, hoping some younger species might come calling someday. Instead, many built a robotic funeral pyre fed by their star's energies, blaring out tides of timeless greatness:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!

as the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley had put it, witnessing the ruins of ancient Egypt, in Afrik.

At the very beginnings of the library, humanity found that it was coming in on an extended discourse, an ancient interstellar conversation, without notes or history readily provided. Only slowly did the cyber-cryptographers fathom that most alien cultures were truly vast, far larger than the sum of all human societies. And much older.

Before actual contact, nobody had really thought the problem through. Historically, Englishmen had plenty of trouble understanding the shadings of, say, the Ozzie Bushmen. Multiply that by thousands of other Earthly and solar system cultures and then square the difficulty, to allow for the problem of expressing it all in sentences—or at least, linear symbolic sequences. Square the complexity again to allow for the abyss separating humanity from any alien culture.

The answer was obvious: any alien translator program had to be as smart as a human. And usually much more so.

The first transmission from any civilization contained elementary signs, to build a vocabulary. That much even human scientists had guessed. But then came incomprehensible slabs, digital Rosetta stones telling how to build a simulated alien mind that could talk down to mere first-timers.

The better part of a century went by before humans worked out how to copy and then represent alien minds in silicon. Finally the Alien Library was built, to care for the Minds and Messages it encased. To extract from

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them knowledge, art, history, and kinds of knowing for which humans might very well have no name.

And to negotiate with them. The cyber-aliens had their own motivations.

"I don't understand your last statement."

I do not need to be told that. You signal body-defiance with your crossed arms, barrier gestures, pursed lips, contradictory eyebrow slants.

"But these tensor topologies are not relevant to what we were discussing."

They are your reward.

"For what?"

Giving me of your essence. By wearing ordinary clothes, as I asked, and thus displaying your overt signals.

"I thought we were discussing the Heliosphere problem."

We were. But you primates can never say only one thing at a time to such as We.

She felt acutely uncomfortable. "Uh, this picture you gave me . . . I can see this is some sort of cylindrical tunnel through—"

The plasma torus of your gas giant world, Jupiter. I suggest it as a way to funnel currents from the moon, Io.

"I appreciate this, and will forward it—"

There is more to know, before your level of technology—forgive me, but it is still crude, and will be so far longer than you surmise—can make full use of this defense.

Ruth suppressed her impulse to widen her eyes. *Defense?* Was this it? A sudden solution? "I'm not a physiker—"

Nor need you be. I intercept your host of messages, all unspoken. Your pelvis is visible beneath your shift, wider and rotated back slightly more than the male Supplicants who come to Us. Waist more slender, thighs thicker. Navel deeper, belly longer. Specializations impossible to suppress.

Where was it—They—going with this? "Those are just me, not messages."

It is becoming of you to deny them. Like your hourglass shape perceived even at a distance, say, across an ancient plain at great distance. Your thighs admit an obligingly wider space, an inward slope to the thickened thighs, that gives an almost knock-kneed appearance.

"I *beg* your pardon—"

A pleasant saying, that—meaning that We have overstepped (another gesture) your boundaries? But I merely seek knowledge for my own repository.

"I—we—don't like being taken apart like this!"

But reduction to essentials is your primary mental habit.

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"Not reducing people!"

Ah, but having done this to the outside world, you surely cannot object to having the same method applied to yourselves.

"People don't like being dissected."

Your science made such great strides—unusual upon the grander stage of worlds—precisely because you could dexterously divide your attentions into small units, all the better to understand the whole.

When They got like this it was best to humor Them. "People don't like it. That is a social mannerism, maybe, but one we *feel* about."

And I seek more.

The sudden grave way the Sagittarius said this chilled her.

Siloh was not happy, though it took a lot of time to figure this out. The trouble with Noughts was their damned lack of signals. No slight downward tug of lips to signal provisional disapproval, no sideways glance to open a possibility. Just the facts, Ma'am. "So it is giving you tantalizing bits."

"*They*, not It. Sometimes I feel I'm talking to several different minds at once."

"It has said the same about us."

The conventional theory of human minds was that they were a kind of legislature, always making deals between differing interests. Only by attaining a plurality could anyone make a decision. She bit her lip to not give away anything, then realized that her bite was visible, too. "We're a whole species. They're a simulation of one."

Siloh made a gesture she could not read. She had expected some congratulations on her work, but then, Siloh was a Nought, and had little use for most human social lubrications. He said slowly, "This cylinder through the Io plasma—the physikers say it is intriguing."

"How? I thought the intruding interstellar plasma was overpowering everything."

"It is. We lost Ganymede Nation today."

She gasped. "I hadn't heard."

"You have been immersed in your studies, as is fitting."

"Does Catkejen know?"

"She has been told."

Not by you, I hope. Siloh was not exactly the sympathetic type. "I should go to her."

"Wait until our business is finished."

"But I—"

"Wait."

Siloh leaned across its broad work plain, which responded by offering information. Ruth crooked her neck but could not make out what hung shimmering in the air before Siloh. Of course; this was a well designed office, so that she could not read its many ingrained inputs. He was probably summoning information all the while he talked to her, without her

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knowing it. Whatever he had learned, he sat back with a contented, small smile. "I believe the Sagittarius Congruence is emerging in full, to tantalize you."

"Congruence?"

"A deeper layer to its intelligence. You should not be deceived into thinking of it as remotely like us. We are comparatively simple creatures." Siloh sat back, steepling its fingers and peering into them, a studied pose. "Never does the Sagittarius think of only a few moves into its game."

"So you agree with Youstani, a Translator Supreme from the twenty-fifth century, that the essential nature of Sagittarius is to see all conversations as a game?"

"Are ours different?" A sudden smile creased his leathery face, a split utterly without mirth.

"I would hope so."

"Then you shall often be deceived."

She went to their apartment immediately, but someone had gotten there before her. It was dark, but she caught muffled sounds from the living room. Was Catkejen crying?

Earth's crescent shed a dim glow into the room. She stepped into the portal of the living room and in the gloom saw someone on the viewing pallet. A low whimper drifted in the darkness, repeating, soft and sad, like crying, yes—

But there were two people there. And the sobbing carried both grief and passion, agony and ecstasy. An ancient tide ran in the room's shadowed musk.

The other person was Geoffrey. Moving with a slow rhythm, he was administering a kind of sympathy Ruth certainly could not. And she had not had the slightest clue of this relationship between them. A pang forked through her. The pain surprised her. She made her way out quietly.

Catkejen's family had not made it out from Ganymede. She had to go through the rituals and words that soften the hard edges of life. She went for a long hike in the domes, by herself. When she returned she was quieter, worked long hours and took up sewing.

The somber prospects of the Ganymede loss cast a pall over all humanity, and affected the Library's work. This disaster was unparalleled in human history, greater even than the Nation Wars.

Still, solid work helped for a while. But after weeks, Ruth needed a break, and there weren't many at the Library. Anything physical beckoned. She had gone for a swim in the spherical pool, of course, enjoying the challenge. And flown in broad swoops across the Greater Dome on plumes of hot air. But a simmering frustration remained. Life had changed.

With Catkejen she had developed a new, friendly, work-buddy relationship with Geoffrey. Much of this was done without words, a negotiation of nuances. They never spoke of that moment in the apartment, and Ruth did not know if they had sensed her presence.

Perhaps more than ever, Geoffrey amused them with his quick talk and

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artful stunts. Ruth admired his physicality, the yeasty smell of him as he laughed and cavorted. HiGeers were known for their focus, which athletics repaid in careers of remarkable performance. The typical HiGee career began in sports and moved later to work in arduous climes, sites in the solar system where human strength and endurance still counted, because machines were not dexterous and supple enough.

Some said the HiGeer concentration might have come from a side effect of their high-spin, centrifugal doughnut habitats. Somehow Geoffrey's concentration came out as a life-of-the-party energy, even after his long hours in intense rapport with his own research.

Appropriately, he was working on the Andromeda Manifold, a knotty tangle of intelligences that stressed the embodied nature of their parent species. Geoffrey's superb nervous system, and especially his exact hand-eye coordination, gave him unusual access to the Manifold. While he joked about this, most of what he found could not be conveyed in words at all. That was one of the lessons of the Library—that other intelligences sensed the world, and the body's relation to it, quite differently. The ghost of Cartesian duality still haunted human thinking.

Together the three of them hiked the larger craters. All good for the body, but Ruth's spirit was troubled. Her own work was not going well.

She could scarcely follow some of the Architecture's conversations. Still less comprehensible were the eerie sensoria it projected to her—sometimes, the only way it would take part in their discourse, for weeks on end.

Finally, frustrated, she broke off connection and did not return for a month. She devoted herself instead to historical records of earlier Sagittarius discourse. From those had come some useful technical inventions, a classic linear text, even a new digital art form. But that had been centuries ago.

Reluctantly she went back into her pod and returned to linear speech mode. "I don't know what you intend by these tonal conduits," she said to the Sagittarius—after all, It probably had an original point of view, even upon its own motivations.

I was dispatched into the Realm to both carry my Creators' essentials, to propagate their supreme Cause, and to gather knowing-wisdom for them.

So it spoke of itself as "I" today—meaning that she was dealing with a shrunken fraction of the Architecture. Was it losing interest? Or withholding itself, after she had stayed away?

I have other functions, as well. Any immortal intelligence must police its own mentation.

Now what did that mean? Suddenly, all over her body washed sheets of some strange signal she could not grasp. The scatter-shot impulses aroused a pulse-quickening unease in her. *Concentrate.* "But . . . but your home world is toward the galactic center, at least twenty thousand light years away. So much time has passed—"

Quite so—my Creators may be long extinct. Probabilities suggest so. I gather from your information, and mine, that the mean lifetime for civilizations in the Realm is comparable to their/our span.

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"So there may be no reason for you to gather information from us at all. You can't send it to them any more." She could not keep the tensions from her voice. In earlier weeks of incessant pod time, she had relied upon her pod's programming to disguise her transmission. And of course, It knew this. Was anything lost on it?

Our motivations do not change. We are eternally a dutiful servant, as are you.

Ah, an advance to "We." She remembered to bore in on the crucial, not be deflected. "Good. If the interstellar plasma gets near Earth—"

We follow your inference. The effects I know well. My Creators inhabit(ed) a world similar to yours, though frankly, more beautiful. (You have wasted so much area upon water!) We managed the electrical environs of our world to send our beacon signal, harnessing the rotational energy of our two moons to the task.

This was further than anyone had gotten with Sagittarius in a lifetime of Librarians. She felt a spike of elation. "Okay, what will happen?"

If the bow shock's plasma density increases further, while your ordinary star ploughs into it, then there shall be electrical consequences.

"What . . . consequences?"

Dire. You must see your system as a portrait in electrodynamics, one that is common throughout the Realm. Perceive: currents seethe forth—

A three-dimensional figure sprang into being before her, with the golden sun at its center. Blue feelers of currents sprouted from the sun's angry red spots, flowing out with the gale of particles, sweeping by the apron-strings of Earth's magnetic fields. This much she knew—that Earth's fields deflected huge energies, letting them pass into the great vault where they would press against the interstellar pressures.

But the currents told a different tale. They arced and soared around each world, cocooning each in some proportion. Then they torqued off into the vastness, smothering in darkness, then eventually returning in high, long arcs to the sun. They were like colossal rubber bands that could never break, but that forces could stretch into fibrous structures.

And here came the bulge of interstellar plasma. Lightning forked all along its intrusion. It engulfed Jupiter, and spikes of coronal fury arced far out from the giant planet. These bright blue streamers curled inward, following long tangents toward the sun.

Some struck the Earth.

"I don't need a detailed description of what that means," she said.

Your world is like many others, a spherical capacitor. Disruption of the electrodynamic equilibrium will endanger the fragile skin of life.

From the Sagittarius came a sudden humid reek. She flinched. Sheeting sounds churned so low that she felt them as deep bass notes resounding in her. Wavelengths longer than her body rang through her bones. Her heart abruptly pounded. A growling storm rose in her ears.

"I . . . I will take this . . . and withdraw."

Have this as well, fair primate—

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A squirt of compressed meaning erupted in her sensorium.

It will self-unlock at the appropriate moment.

Opened, the first fraction of the squashed nugget was astonishing. Even Siloh let itself appear impressed. She could tell this by the millimeter rise of a left lip.

"This text is for the Prefect's attention." When Siloh rose and walked around its work-plane she realized that she had never seen its extent—nearly three meters of lean muscle, utterly without any hint of male or female shaping. The basic human machine, engineered for no natural world. It stopped to gaze at her. "This confirms what some physikers believe. Jupiter is the key."

Within an hour the Prefect agreed. He eyed them both and flicked on a display. "The Sagittarius confirms our worst suspicions. Trainee, you said that you had captured from it yet more?"

She displayed the full data-nugget It had given her. A pyrotechnic display arced around a simulated Jupiter—

"There, at the poles," the Prefect said. "That cylinder."

The fringing fields carried by interstellar plasma swarmed into the cylinder. This time, instead of ejecting fierce currents, Jupiter absorbed them.

"That tube is electrically shorting out the disturbance," Siloh said. "The cylinders at both poles—somehow they shunt the energies into the atmosphere."

"And not into ours," Ruth said. "It's given us a solution."

The Prefect said, "What an odd way to do it. No description, just pictures."

Siloh said slowly, "Ummmm . . . And just how do we build those cylinders?"

They looked at her silently, but she got the message: *Find out.*

The sensations washing over her were quite clear now. She had asked for engineering details, and it had countered with a demand. A quite graphic one.

This is my price. To know the full extent of the human sensorium.

"Sex?! You want to—"

It seems a small measure in return for the life of your world.

Before she could stop herself she blurted, "But you're not—"

Human? Very well, we wish to fathom the meaning of that word, all the more. This is one step toward comprehending what that symbol-complex means.

"You're a *machine*. A bunch of electronic bips and stutters."

Then we ask merely for a particular constellation of such information.

She gasped, trying not to lose it entirely. "You . . . would barter that for a civilization?"

We are a civilization unto Ourself. Greater than any of you singletons can know.

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"I . . . I can't. I *won't*."

"You will," Siloh said with stony serenity.

Ruth blinked. "No!"

"Yes."

"This is more, much more, than required by all the Guild standards of neural integration."

"But—yes."

In her sickening swirl of emotions, she automatically reached for rules. Emotion would carry no weight with this Nought.

She felt on firm ground here, despite not recalling well the welter of policy and opinions surrounding the entire phenomenon. A millennium of experience and profound philosophical analysis, much of it by artificial minds, had created a vast, weighty body of thought: Library Meta-theory. A lot of it, she thought, was more like the barnacles on the belly of a great ship, parasitic and along for the ride. But the issue could cut her now. Given a neurologically integrated system with two parties enmeshed, what was the proper separation?

"This issue is far larger than individual concerns." Siloh's face remained calm though flinty.

"Even though a Trainee, I am *in charge* of this particular translation—"

"Only nominally. I can have you removed in an instant. Indeed, I can do so myself."

"That would take a while, for anyone to achieve my levels of attunement and focus—"

"I have been monitoring your work. I can easily step in—"

"The Sagittarius Composite doesn't want to sleep with *you*."

Siloh froze, composure gone. "You are inserting personal rebuke here!"

Her lips twitched as she struggled not to smile. "Merely an observation. Sagittarius desires something it cannot get among the Nought class."

"I can arrange matters differently, then." Its face worked with several unreadable signals—as though, she thought, something unresolved was trying to express itself.

"I want to remain at work—"

Suddenly he smiled and said lightly, "Oh, you may. You definitely may."

An abrupt hand waved her away. Plainly it had reached some insight it would not share. But what? Siloh's bland gaze gave away nothing. And she was not good enough at translating him, yet.

Some of the Messages lodged in the Library had not been intended for mortal ears or eyes at all. Like some ancient rulers of Mesopotamia, these alien authors directly addressed their deities, and only them. One opened plaintively,

Tell the God we know and say
For your tomorrow we give our today.

It was not obvious whether this couplet (for in the original it was clearly rhymed) came from a living civilization, or from an artifact left to remind the entire galaxy of what had come before. Perhaps, in alien terms, the distinction did not matter.

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Such signals also carried Artificials, as the digital minds immersed in the Messages were termed. The advanced Artificials, such as Sagittarius, often supervised vast data-banks containing apparent secrets, outright brags, and certified history—which was, often, merely gossip about the great. These last, rather transparently, were couched to elicit punishment for the author's enemies, from alien gods. This differed only in complexity and guile from the ancient motivations of Babylonian kings.

Most Messages of this beseeching tone assumed some universal moral laws and boasted of their authors' compliance with them. At first the Sagittarius Architecture had appeared to be of this class, and so went largely uninterpreted for over a century. Only gradually did its sophistication and rich response become apparent. Most importantly, it was a new class entirely—the first Architecture Artificial.

It had something roughly comparable to a human unconscious—and yet it could see into its own inner minds at will. It was as if a human could know all of his/her impulses came from a locus of past trauma, or just a momentary anger—and could see this instantly, by tracing back its own workings. The strange power of human art sprang in part from its invisible wellsprings. To be able to unmask that sanctum was an unnerving prospect.

Yet human-made Artificials always worked with total transparency. The Sagittarius could work that way, or it could mask portions of its own mind from itself, and so attain something like that notorious cliché, the Human Condition.

Since in that era current opinion held that the supreme advantage of any artificial mind lay in its constant transparency, this was a shock. What advantage could come to an Artificial that did not immediately know its own levels? Which acted out of thinking patterns it could not consciously review?

Since this was a property the Sagittarius Architecture shared (in a way) with humans, the discussion became heated for over two centuries. And unresolved.

Now when Ruth engaged with it, she was acutely conscious of how the Artificial could change nature with quixotic speed. Swerves into irritation came fast upon long bouts of analytic serenity. She could make no sense of these, or fathom the information she gained in these long episodes of engagement. The neurological impact upon her accumulated. Her immersion in the pod carried a jittery static. Her nerves frayed.

Some fraction of the information the Sagittarius Architecture gave her bore upon the problem of heliospheric physics, but she could not follow this. She conveyed the passages, many quite long, to Siloh.

The crisis over the Artificial's demand seemed to have passed. She worked more deeply with it now, and so one afternoon in the pod, concentrating upon the exact nuances of the link, she did not at first react when she felt a sudden surge of unmistakable desire in herself. It shook her, yeasty and feverish, pressing her calves together and urging her thighs to ache with a sweet longing.

Somehow this merged with the passage currently under translation/discussion. She entered more fully into the difficult problem of extracting just the right subtlety from the when all at once

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she was not reasoning in one part of her mind but, it seemed, in all of them.

From there until only a few heartbeats later she ran the gamut of all previous passions. An ecstasy and union she had experienced only a few times—and only partially, she now saw—poured through her. Her body shook with gusts of raw pleasure. Her Self sang its song, rapt. A constriction of herself seized this flood and rode it. Only blinding speed could grasp what this was, and in full passionate flow she felt herself hammered on a microsecond anvil—into the internal time frames of the Composite.

Dizzy, blinding speed. It registered vast sheets of thought while a single human neuron was charging up to fire. Its cascades of inference and experience were like rapids in a river she could not see but only feel, a kinesthetic acceleration, swerves that swept finally into a delightful blur.

Thought, sensation—all one.

She woke in the pod. Only a few minutes had passed since she had last registered any sort of time at all.

Yet she knew what had happened.

And regretted that it was over.

And hated herself for feeling that way.

"It *had* me."

Siloh began, "In a manner of speaking—"

"Against my will!"

Siloh looked judicial. "So you say. The recordings are necessarily only a pale shadow, so I cannot tell from experiencing them myself—"

Scornfully: "How could you anyway?"

"This discussion will not flow in that direction."

"Damn it, you knew it would do this!"

Siloh shook his head. "I cannot predict the behavior of such an architectural mind class. No one can."

"You at least *guessed* that it would, would find a way into me, to . . . to *mate* with me. At a level we poor stunted humans can only approximate because we're always in two different bodies. It was *in* mine. It—they—knew that in the act of translation there are ways, paths, avenues. . . ." She sputtered to a stop.

"I am sure that description of the experience is impossible." Siloh's normally impenetrable eyes seemed to show real regret.

Yeah? she thought. *How would you know?* But she said as dryly as she could muster, "You could review the recordings yourself, see—"

"I do not wish to."

"Just to measure—"

"No."

Abruptly she felt intense embarrassment. Bad enough if a man had been privy to those moments, but a Nought. . . .

How alien would the experience be, for Siloh?—and *alien* in two different senses of the word? She knew suddenly that there were provinces in the landscape of desire Siloh could not visit. The place she had been with the Composite no human had ever been. Siloh could not go there. Perhaps an ordinary man could not, either.

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"I know this is important to you," Siloh said abstractly. "You should also know that the Composite also gave us, in the translation you achieved—while you had your, uh, seizure—the key engineering design behind the heliospheric defense."

She said blankly, "The cylinders. . . ."

"Yes, they are achievable, and very soon. A 'technically sweet' solution, I am told by the Prefect. Authorities so far above us that they are beyond view have begun the works needed. They took your information and are making it into an enormous construction at both poles of Jupiter. The entire remaining population of the Jovian Belt threw themselves into shaping the artifacts to achieve this."

"They've been following . . . what *I* say?"

"Yours was deemed the most crucial work. Yet you could not be told."

She shook her head to clear it. "So I wouldn't develop shaky hands."

"And you did not, not at all." Siloh beamed in an inscrutable way, one eyebrow canted at an ambiguous angle.

"You knew," she said leadenly. "What it would do."

"I'm sure I do not fathom what you mean."

She studied Siloh, who still wore the same strange beaming expression. *Remember,* she thought, *it can be just as irritating as an ordinary man, but it isn't one.*

The colossal discharge of Jupiter's magnetospheric potentials was an energetic event unparalleled in millennia of humanity's long strivings to harness nature.

The Composite had brought insights to bear that physikers would spend a century untangling. For the moment, the only important fact was that by releasing plasma spirals at just the right pitch, and driving these with electrodynamic generators (themselves made of filmy ionized barium), a staggering current came rushing out of the Jovian system.

At nearly the speed of light it intersected the inward bulge of the heliosphere. Currents moved in nonlinear dances, weaving a pattern that emerged within seconds, moving in intricate harmonies.

Within a single minute a complex web of forces flexed into being. Within an hour the bulge of interstellar gas arrested its inward penetration. It halted, waves slamming in vexed lines of magnetic force, against the Jovian sally. And became stable.

Quickly humans—ever irreverent, even in the face of catastrophe—termed their salvation The Basket. Invisible to the eye, the giant web the size of the inner solar system was made of filmy fields that weighed nothing. Yet it was all the same massively powerful, a dynamically responding screen protecting the Earth from a scalding death. The hydrogen wall seethed redly in the night sky. To many, it seemed an angry animal caught at last in a gauzy net.

She witnessed the display from the Grand Plaza with a crowd of half a million. It was humbling, to think that mere primates had rendered such blunt pressures awesome but impotent.

The Sagittarius sent, **We render thanks.**

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Her chest was tight. She had dreaded entering the pod again, and now could not speak.

We gather it is traditional among you to compliment one's partner, and particularly a lady . . . afterward.

"Don't . . . don't try."

We became something new from that moment.

She felt anger and fear, and yet simultaneously, pride and curiosity. They twisted together in her. Sweat popped out on her upper lip. The arrival of such emotions, stacked on top of each other, told her that she had been changed by what had happened in this pod, and would—could—never be the same. "I did not *want* it."

Then by my understanding of your phylum, you would not then have desired such congress.

"I—me, the conscious me—did not want it!"

We do not recognize that party alone. Rather, we recognize all of you equally. All your signals, do we receive.

"I don't want it to happen again."

Then it will not. It would not have happened the first time had the congruence between us not held true.

She felt the ache in herself. It rose like a tide, swollen and moist and utterly natural. She had to bring to bear every shred of her will to stop the moment, disconnect, and leave the pod, staggering and weeping and then running.

Geoffrey opened the door to his apartment, blinking owlishly—and then caught her expression.

"I know it's late, I wondered. . . ." She stood numbly, then made herself brush past him, into the shadowed room.

"What's wrong?" He wore a white robe and wrapped it self-consciously around his middle.

"I don't think I can handle all this."

He smiled sympathetically. "You're the toast of the Library, what's to handle?"

"I—come here."

Words, linear sequences of blocky words—all useless. She reached inside the robe and found what she wanted. Her hands slid over muscled skin and it was all *so different*, real, not processed and amped and translated through centuries of careful dry precision.

A tremor swept over her, across the gap between them, onto his moistly electric flesh.

"There is news."

"Oh?" She found it hard to focus on Siloh's words.

"You are not to discuss this with anyone," Siloh said woodenly. "The dis-

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charges from Jupiter's poles—they are now oscillating. At very high frequencies."

She felt her pulse trip-hammer, hard and fast and high, still erratic now, hours after she had left Geoffrey. Yet her head was ahead of her heart; a smooth serenity swept her along, distracting her with the pleasure of the enveloping sensation. "The Basket, it's holding, though?"

"Yes." Siloh allowed himself a sour smile. "Now the physikers say that this electromagnetic emission is an essential part of the Basket's power matrix. It cannot be interfered with in the slightest. Even though it is drowning out the sum of all of humanity's transmissions in the same frequency band. It is swamping us."

"Because?"

Siloh's compressed mouth moved scarcely at all. "It."

"You mean. . . ."

"The Composite. It made this happen, by the designs it gave us."

"Why would it want. . . ." Her voice trailed off as she felt a wave of conflicting emotions.

"Why? The signal Jupiter is sending out now, so powerfully, is a modified version of the original Message we received from the Sagittarius authors."

"Jupiter is broadcasting *their* Message?"

"Clearly, loudly. Into the plane of the galaxy."

"Then it built the Basket to re-radiate its ancestors', its designers'—"

"We have learned," Siloh said, "a lesson perhaps greater than what the physikers gained. The Artificials have their own agendas. One knows this, but never has it been more powerfully demonstrated to us."

She let her anxiety out in a sudden, manic burst of laughter. Siloh did not seem to notice. When she was done she said, "So it saved us. And used us."

Siloh said, "Now Jupiter is broadcasting the Sagittarius Message at an enormous volume, to the outer fringes of the galaxy's disk. To places the original Sagittarius signal strength could not have reached."

"It's turned us into its relay station." She laughed again, but it turned to a groan and a sound she had never made before. Somehow it helped, that sound. She knew it was time to stop making it when the men eased through the door of Siloh's office, coming to take her in hand.

Gingerly, she came back to work a month later. Siloh seemed atypically understanding. He set her to using the verification matrices for a few months, calming work. Far easier, to skate through pillars and crevasses of classically known information. She could experience it all at high speed, as something like recreation—the vast cultural repositories of dead civilizations transcribed upon her skin, her neural beds, her five senses linked and webbed into something more. She even made a few minor discoveries.

She crept up upon the problem of returning to the task she still desired: the Sagittarius. It was, after all, a thing in a box. The truism of her training now rang loudly in her life:

The Library houses entities that are not merely aliens and not merely artificial minds, but the strange sum of both. A Trainee forgets this at her peril.

* * *

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After more months, the moment came.
The Sagittarius sent,

We shall exist forever, in some manifestation. That is our injunction, ordained by a span of time you cannot fathom. We carry forward our initial commanding behest, given unto us from our Creators, before all else.

"The Sagittarians told you to? You were under orders to make use of whatever resources you find?" She was back in the pod, but a team stood by outside, ready to extricate her in seconds if she gave the signal.

We were made as a combination of things, aspects for which you have not words nor even suspicions. We have our own commandments from on high.

"Damn you! I was so close to you—and I didn't know!"

You cannot know me. We are vaster.

"Did you say 'vaster' or 'bastard'?"
She started laughing again, but this time it was all right. It felt good to make a dumb joke. Very, well, human. In the simplicity of doing that she could look away from all this, feel happy and safe for a flickering second. With some luck, at least for a moment, she might have a glimmer of the granite assurance this strange mind possessed. It was all alone, the only one of its kind here, and yet unshakable. Perhaps there was something in that to admire.
And now she knew that she could not give up her brushes with such entities. In the last few days, she had doubted that. This was now her life. Only now did she fathom how eerie a life it might be.
"Will you go silent on us, again?"

We may at any time.

"Why?"

The answer does not lie within your conceptual space.

She grimaced. "Damn right." She could forget the reality of the chasm between her and this thing that talked and acted and was not ever going to be like anyone she had ever known, or could know. She would live with the not knowing, the eternal ignorance before the immensity of the task here.

The abyss endured. In that there was a kind of shelter. It was not much but there it was. ○

—for Fred Lerner

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COYOTE AT THE END OF HISTORY

Michael Swanwick

The ever-popular Michael Swanwick is currently a finalist for three Hugo awards. Two of his nominations are for a short story, "'Hello,' Said the Stick" (March 2002), and a novelette, "Slow Life" (December 2002), that were first published in *Analog*—our sister magazine. The other nomination is for the short story, "The Little Cat Laughed to See Such Sport," which was published in the October/November 2002 issue of *Asimov's*.

Coyote and the Star People

Coyote was walking up and down the Earth, as he did in those days, when he decided to visit the spaceport at First Landing, which was then called Kansas City. He had heard a lot about the Star People, and he wanted to see them for himself.

When he got there he found that the Star People were like nobody he had ever seen. They were tall and slender and their skin was golden. Two of their eyes were like emeralds and the rest were like garnets. As soon as he met them he decided to play some sort of trick on them. That was just the way Coyote was.

"Where do you come from?" Coyote asked.

"Our home is deep in the Milky Way. Where is yours?"

"I left where I lived, but I do not know how long ago."

"Yes?"

"Now I go everywhere. But I never know where I am going." All the while he was talking, Coyote was secretly looking around him. The Star People were very rich. They had many wonderful things. "That is a very fine starship you have," he said. "Perhaps you can show me how to build one of my own."

"Oh no, we can't do that."

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"You have nice weapons, too. I wouldn't mind buying some of them."

"There are many of you and only a few of us," the Star People said. (This was a long time ago.) "No, no, we won't sell you our weapons!"

Now Coyote picked up a pot. It was an ordinary-looking black pot, but he sensed that there was more to it than that. "What is this?"

"That is just a cornucopia. We put leaves and twigs and other ordinary things into it and they turn into food."

In his heart, Coyote decided he must have this device. At this time there were many people in the world who did not have enough to eat and he felt sorry for them. Also, he thought it would make him rich. "What will you take for it?" he asked.

"We would like some land of our own," the Star People said. "Someplace where we can build the kind of cities our people like to live in."

"For this pot," Coyote said, "I will give you the most valuable thing my people have."

"Oh? What is that?"

"An entire continent, the site of our first great civilization." Coyote showed them books and maps and other proofs. "We call it Atlantis."

So the trade was made.

But when the Star People went to take possession of Atlantis, they found that it had sunk into the ocean long ago, or else it had never existed. Angrily, they confronted Coyote. "You tricked us!"

"Yes, that is true."

"You cheated us!"

"Perhaps."

"You lied to us!"

"No, for I said that I would give you the most valuable thing that we Mud People have. Has no one ever told you that we value dreams above all else?" Then, laughing, Coyote ran away.

So for a while, then, there was great prosperity on Earth. For the first time in history, all the world's billions had enough to eat. And it was all because of Coyote.

Coyote Changes His Sex

Coyote was never satisfied. If he sat near the fire, he missed the open air. If he walked the roads, he yearned for the comforts of a house. When times were good, he worried about inflation. When inflation was low, he wasn't getting a good enough return on his investments. He was in a bar one night with a pretty girl on his lap, and he said to her, "Why should I buy *you* drinks when you never buy *me* any? It seems to me that women get everything they want just by being women. What do men get for being men? Nothing."

"Being a woman is not so easy as you think it is," the bar-girl said.

But Coyote did not listen. The Star People had a machine that for a few coins would change men into women and women into men. But it only changed their outsides—their faces and features and reproductive or-

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gans. Inside they were unchanged. He ran straight to the machine and it turned him into a very beautiful woman.

Back to the bar Coyote went. She met a man there and they decided to be married and live together. So they did.

The bar-girl was right. Being a woman was not so easy as Coyote had thought it would be. But she got used to it. Coyote was adaptable. She could get used to anything. So Coyote and Badger (that was her husband's name) lived together for many years.

One day Coyote came home and found a woman there. Badger had gone to the machine and changed into a woman. "What is this?" Coyote asked.

"Oh, I'm just Badger. Now you have a wife instead of a husband, that's all."

"But what can two women do together?" Coyote asked.

"I will show you," said Badger.

After this, those two were always changing their sex. Sometimes they were two women living together. Sometimes two men. And sometimes one of each. They did this practically every day.

This offended the other Mud People. "This is not right," they said. "People should be one thing and never change!" They came and burned down Badger's house and when Coyote and Badger came running out, they clubbed them to death. They did this everywhere. Many cities burned. Millions died, including many people who had never changed their sex even once. But the Mud People had no way of knowing who was what, so they just killed as many as they could.

But when the rioting was over, Coyote brought himself back to life. He picked himself up and dusted himself off, and trotted away, singing happily to himself. For in those days Coyote was still full of power, and all the world belonged to him.

Coyote Meets a Machine

Coyote was making worthless money. First it was made out of paper, and then it was made out of electrons, and finally it was made out of numbers that only he understood. You had to take his word that he had it, and then when you sold him something, you had to take his word that he had given it to you.

The Star People were used to plain dealing, and did not know how to respond to Coyote's deceits. He sold them promises written down on paper. He sold them shares in things that did not exist. He used their wealth to build great projects. Yet somehow he always prospered, and they did not.

Finally, they decided to build a machine that would deal with Coyote for them. This machine looked like any Mud Person on the outside. But on the inside it was like Coyote. It was treacherous and deceitful and clever. It never told the truth when a lie would do.

Now at that time, there were no machines that could think. Only peo-

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ple could think. So Coyote was astonished to meet a machine as shrewd and devious as himself. He decided immediately to play some trick on it. That's how he was.

"I have some commodities futures I would like to sell you," he said.

"You will not fool me as easily as that," laughed the machine. "But I will happily sell *you* as many futures as you like."

"Perhaps you would like to buy a bridge?"

"From you? Never!"

"You are very clever," said Coyote wonderingly.

"I am your equal in all ways," the machine boasted.

"Oh no, you are not," said Coyote.

"Oh yes, I am," said the machine.

Coyote took his penis off and put it on the table before him. "Can you do this?" he asked.

"Yes, I can." The machine took off his penis (it was made of metal) and set it on the table as well.

"Let's see you do this." Coyote detached his arms and legs and laid them down on the table before him.

"That is easy for me." The machine took off his arms and legs as well.

Coyote took out his jelly-eyes.

The machine took out his machine-eyes.

"But you can't do this." Coyote took out all his inner parts, his heart and his lungs and his stomach and his brains as well and put them each separately on the table.

"Yes, I can." The machine took all of *his* inner parts, his circuit boards and memory chips and wires, and put them on the table as well.

Then Coyote put himself back together (this is a trick he knew how to do), shook himself, and said, "Well, you have convinced me that you are as good as I am in all ways!" He scooped up all the machine parts and ran off with them. Some of these parts he put in his television set and others in his car and still others in his computer. Soon all his machines were as clever and deceitful as him. All of his schemes and plots worked better than ever and, for a time, he thrived as never before.

Coyote and His Many Wives

In those days Coyote had many wives. He had wives wherever he went. In this way he never had to do his own cooking, and he never had to work for a living. His wives took care of all that.

One day, however, this all changed. Coyote was living with a woman named Sparrow. She had been working hard all day, while Coyote was drinking beer and watching sports on television. When she brought him food, he complained that it wasn't good enough. When she asked for sex, he said he was too tired.

"I've had it!" Sparrow exclaimed. "You don't work, and you don't help with the chores, and you won't keep your wife happy. I would be better off with no husband at all!"

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Coyote was scandalized. "Do not talk like that," he scolded. "You will bring bad luck."

Sparrow, though, was adamant. She threw him out of her house. Then she called up all his other wives and told them of his behavior. They all hardened their hearts against Coyote. Wherever he went, his wives closed their doors to him. He had no one to take care of him, no one to feed him.

Finally, Coyote thought to himself, "I will go to the Star People and ask them for a machine to keep my wives in line. Surely this will be easy for them." So he did that thing. But the Star People only laughed in his face.

"Who would make such a machine?" they asked. "What would be its purpose?"

But Coyote had been snooping around. Now he asked, "What is this little wand for?"

"Oh, it is a thing that if you point it at someone that person has to do what you tell them. We don't know why we made it, though. It would be against our ethics to use it."

When the Star People weren't looking, Coyote stole the wand and slipped it under his coat. Then he went back into town to see Frog Woman, who was another one of his wives.

When she saw who was at her door, Frog Woman started to close it in his face. But Coyote pointed the little wand at her and said, "Let me in." She stepped away from the door and he sat down on the couch in front of the television. "Bring me a beer," he told her, and she did so. He told her to do many things during his stay, and always she obeyed him. Because he pointed the little wand at her.

Coyote returned to his old ways. Wherever he went, he pointed his little wand at his many wives and they did whatever he told them. So used to this did he become that when he went to see his wife Hummingbird, he forgot to point the wand at her. She opened the door and in he walked. "Get me a beer." She did so. "Sit in my lap." She did that too.

Hummingbird had heard from the other wives how Coyote had discovered a way to make them obey him despite their better judgment. So she toyed with his hair, and pretended to be in love with him, and got him to talking about himself. She was determined to get to the bottom of this mystery.

Pretty soon Coyote began to brag about how he had outwitted his wives. He told Hummingbird all about his wand. "Can I see it?" she asked. And when he showed it to her, she snatched it out of his hand and broke it into a thousand splinters. She threw the splinters out the window. She threw Coyote out of her house.

But Coyote went straight back to Sparrow's house, where all the trouble began, and when she opened the door he just stuck his hands in his pockets and grinned at her. He was a good-looking man, was Coyote. So Sparrow took him in. Even though he didn't have the little wand anymore, she still loved him.

But all the splinters of the broken wand were picked up, one by one, by folk who were passing by, and because they all had the same power as the wand, they caused much trouble in the world.

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Coyote Decides to Live Forever

Coyote was going to and fro. He had no purpose, he was just going. He saw Bear and asked him how things were going.

"Not so good," said Bear. "These new folk" (he meant the Star People) "come in and take some land. Then there are more of them and they need more land. So they offer things no man would turn down for it. Little by little, they have taken all of my land and there is no place for me to be."

"Huh," said Coyote, and on he went. After a while he came upon Dragon and asked him how he was. Same story. "New Star People are born every day," Dragon said, "but no one ever sees them die."

"Fancy that," said Coyote. On he went. Eventually he met Bulldog, asked him the same question and got the same answer as the others. "I think they live forever," Bulldog said. "Somebody told me that they did."

On hearing this, Coyote dropped all he was doing and hurried straight to New Home, which in the native tongue was called Toronto. "People say that you never die," he said. "Is this true?"

"Yes," the Star People replied. "We have medicines for that."

"I would like some of those medicines, if you please."

"They are too valuable to give away. The likes of you could never afford them."

"Surely I have something that you need."

"We always need land," the Star People said. "But whenever we try to buy it from you, you cheat us."

Coyote and the Star People sat down to bargain. The Star People bargained hard, for they had been fooled by Coyote many, many times. In the end, he gave them New England. He gave them Mexico. He gave them San Francisco and Seattle and the Gulf Coast and New York City as well. This is why there are no Mud People in any of those places today. One by one, Coyote gave the Star People everything he owned. For he thought, "Forever is a long time. If I live forever, there'll be plenty of opportunity to trick the Star People into giving me these places back again."

So it was done. The Star People gave Coyote the medicines to live forever, and he went up and down the continent, giving them to all the Mud People who would take them. This was almost everybody, for they all wanted to live forever.

But then a strange thing happened. Everywhere the Mud People began to die. They grew sick and they withered and died. Only those few who had not taken the medicines did not grow sick. Their numbers dwindled to almost nothing.

Coyote went to see the Star People. "Your medicines were supposed to make us live forever," he said. "Instead, they make us all die."

"It is not our fault," said the Star People. "The medicines were perfectly good. How were *we* to know you didn't have triple-strand DNA?"

"You have cheated me," said Coyote. "Give me back all my lands and wealth."

But when the Star People heard this, they grew angry. "How many times did you trick us?" they said. "You stole our technology and never

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gave us the land for it you promised. Now the shoe is on the other foot. There are many of us, and therefore we need the land. There are few of you, and therefore you don't."

So Coyote went away, sorrowing.

Since that time, there have been very few Mud People, and they have never been wealthy again. The world they used to own belongs today to the Star People, who take better care of it than ever Coyote had. Coyote himself is still famed in stories, but he is never seen walking up and down the Earth anymore, and nobody knows if he's still alive or not.

These legends of that tribe of the Mud People sometimes called North Americans have been recorded and preserved in order that the memory of their past greatness might never fade. ○

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STILL LIFE, WITH FROG

My friends back in Raleigh
had a chipped ceramic planter
shaped like a frog, and
it rested on their beer-
can-cluttered coffee table
like the presiding deity
in a temple to squalor.

They used the frog for an ashtray,
tossing smoldering butts into
its comically outsized
and gaping mouth.

One night a show came on
the Discovery channel, and they
were too stoned to change it,
so I watched, and learned all
about Tlaltecuhtli,

the gigantic frog-
monster of Aztec mythology,
with fangs like sickles,
and a vast mouth
that served incidentally
as the gateway to the land
of the dead.

That's the night
I gave up smoking,
but even now, when I think
of someday dying,
I see a chipped green
mouth full of ashes,
venting smoke,
and the painted plaster eyes
of the inevitable.

—Tim Pratt

Illustration by June Levine

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THE HIBERNATORS

Brian W. Aldiss

This distinguished grandmaster of science fiction tells us, "A friend of mine, Holling Lohner, who lives in Santa Monica, is now composing music for my opera, *Oedipus on Mars*. I'm excited. A film is now going into production of my novella, 'Brothers of the Head.' I'm over-excited. I'm writing a novel called, *A Lady and Her Questioner*. I'm thrilled. Otherwise chilling out."

A word of warning: There are brief scenes in this story that may be disquieting to some.

The time of the Great Darkness was approaching, when oblivion would descend and Time itself stand still.

Mother Fleebis of Rockadoof took a final bowl of nutrition to her mating partner, Castener of Rockadoof.

He looked up, pulled the plug from his ear, and smiled his tired old smile at her. He accepted the bowl with both hands.

She said, "It is time to take the children to the hibernatorium now, Cast. Our appointment to enter is due. It is safer inside. Will you not change your mind and come with us?"

He gestured towards his apparatus. "How can I leave my scanners at such a crucial time? I feel I am on the edge of something. I must pursue it till I fall asleep."

Without rancor, she asked him if his scanners were more precious to him than the children.

"My dear Fleebis," he replied, "would not life on our world be a kind of prison if we did not believe that we might change and develop: that for instance our mental and spiritual lives might never expand, that there might never come a time when those future versions of ourselves would scarcely credit our present state?"

She replied with a sigh that he was always thinking of the future.

He said, "My dear, that is more profitable than thinking always of the past."

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"But we are a part of nature, Cast, aren't we? How can we change? Our annual long sleeps—"

"We have changed," he said quickly. "Our conception of ourselves has changed radically in the last hundred years. No longer do we see ourselves devoured by a great black monster when darkness comes. That anthropomorphism has been banished by our new awareness that we are accidental by-products of vast events in space and time. We now understand eclipses. We are the dust and ashes of dead suns and exploding novas—the very products of distant sequencing."

Castener leant forward, addressing his mating partner with intensity.

"But that's just our bodies. How did human consciousness develop on Moorn? When? We don't know. We may be the only species with consciousness in the universe. But that consciousness is in some way apart from our bodies. Maybe in future—the far future—we will be able to live only in consciousness, separate from our bodies, free from physical need. Then when the Great Darkness comes, we will no longer fear it."

He realized as he was speaking that he had treated Fleebis to such lectures before.

"Time's getting on," she said. "I wanted to shampoo my hair before we left for the hibernatorium." As she adjusted the hair at the back of her head, Castener's mouth shut like a trap. "Off you go, then!"

It was her turn to be offended. "Aren't you going to come up and kiss Guthram and Miney good-bye?"

"I must resolve this equation."

"Well . . . Good-bye then."

"I'll come up if I can. How is Guthram?"

She said over her shoulders as she started up the stair, "Too late."

To the inhabitants of Moorn, it seemed like a paradox: that the sun was nearly at zenith, and yet the Great Darkness was about to descend on them. The sky was blue and almost cloudless, yet a wind screamed down the streets. Tarrell, the primary, could not be seen. Yet its approach was inevitable, and imminent.

Transportation had already ceased. Fleebis planned to walk to the local hibernatorium. She was vexed because Guthram had insisted on going down to say good-bye to his procreator.

"Will you be all right?" Castener asked the boy, scrutinizing his face. "You are almost a man."

"I don't feel sleepy, dad."

"Seems there are two sorts of people, those who hibernate and a much smaller number, the freaks who don't hibernate. I don't hibernate. Possibly it is an evolutionary effect. Maybe you won't hibernate. You used to do so as a baby."

"I'm not a baby any more."

Tears filled his eyes. He knew it was true. "Sure. Growth is one of the miracles of time and space . . ."

He kissed his son. "Take care of yourself, dear boy. I'm anxious for you."

As he embraced his father, arms thrown about his neck, Guthram asked, "Dad, what really *is* space?"

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"Space is one of the two all-embracing things we live in, Guth, the other thing being time."

"So what really is time? You can't see it, can you?"

"No, but you can feel it."

"I can't."

"Biologically speaking, we are all products of time."

Castener watched his son disappear up the stairs, thinking with regret that perhaps he should have kept the boy with him. But then—there would have been all the bother of feeding and amusing him, interfering with work.

Sighing, he turned back to his scanners.

The local hibernatorium stood on the edge of Vurndrol City. Its massive structure loomed windowless over the low houses of the population. It could have been mistaken for a gigantic rock. It sported a long tail, a trail of people made antlike by its immensity, wending their way to shelter in its multitudinous cells. They entered the brightly lit entrance and were swallowed up, the chill wind whistling at their rear.

Fleebis was leading her children to the shelter. They were entering into the embrace of the hibernatorium's shadow.

"But I still don't feel at all tired, ma," said Guthram, lagging behind the bulk of his mother.

"Of course you do," cooed his mother in consolatory tones. "Just you wait till we are settled down."

She was clutching to her bosom Guthram's sister, Miney, who was already half asleep.

"I can't sleep, ma. I want to keep out of here."

She looked with concern into his troubled face. "This is no time to be outside, dear."

"Ma, I want to keep out of here! I really dislike this place."

Feeling the resistance in Guthram's hand, which she was clutching, Fleebis uttered more words of encouragement. "Once we get snuggled down in our cell, you'll be asleep in no time. I'll sing to you."

The crowd of which they formed a part, entered the building. Fleebis had their tickets checked by an official.

Miney roused long enough to say, "I'm asleep already . . ."

Guthram inhaled the warm sickly sweet smell of the interior. The hibernatorium had stood empty for six months; now it was heating up to sustain its sleepers during the Great Darkness. He felt something close to fear at the thought of surrendering his being to sleep for all but half a year.

Fleebis kept firm hold of his hand as a minion escorted them in a slow-moving elevator all the way up to their cell on the forty-fourth floor. The lighting here was dim. People draped in blankets jostled about like aged peasants in an oil painting. They spoke in subdued tones, as if the world of sleep were an eerie forest. A sort of murmurous complaint arose from them, a united breath of human resignation.

"After all, we've got to be what Nature intends us to be," Fleebis said to a woman she pushed against.

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"I'll be glad of the rest myself," was the half-whispered answer.

They struggled into their padded cell, and lay down on the couches, Guthram still faintly protesting that he was not tired.

"Don't be a nuisance, there's a dear," said Fleebis. Putting her arm round the lad, holding him suffocatingly close, she sang him a song, whiskery with tradition.

Comets and starlight
Comets and starlight
Time's come to sleep tight
You too shall sleep tight
Sandman is waiting

Once Moorn is mooring behind big Ma Tarrell
Big big Ma Tarrell big as a barrel
Sleeping is right sleeping is fun
While we're all hibernating
Right away from the sun
Away from the sun

Miney fluttered into sleep, thumb in mouth. As Fleebis uttered the last notes of her song, she too closed her eyes and slept. And so they would both lie, unknowing, sleeping away the six months during which the parent body of the gas giant Tarrell obscured the sun from the satellite Moorn, and chill prevailed over the face of their little world.

In the dozy cell, a bulkhead light gleamed. It, too, like most human consciousness, would be extinguished when Moorn entered Tarrell's shadow in a few hours' time. By its light, Guthram surveyed his mother's face. Although Fleebis was not yet in hibernation proper, already her face was assuming a disquieting blankness.

A wave of loneliness filled Guthram's being. He worried that he felt no prompting to sleep. What was wrong with him? Cautiously, he began to extricate himself from under his mother's protective arm.

Once free, he crawled from the door of the cell and began his descent through the great building, squeezing past people who were still seeking their numbered cells. Small blue lights lit the way. Floors were carpeted. Everything was muffled. Every story was filled with a myriad quiet snuffles, as thousands surrendered their souls to the Great Sleep.

At last he gained the entrance to the hibernatorium. Stragglers were still entering, producing or fumbling for their tickets before merging into the dimness of the interior. The boy slipped out into the brighter world beyond.

He stood for a moment, breathing the purer air, letting the wind pluck at his clothes. His one thought was to return to his father and then make some sort of plan for himself.

Scanning the sky, still a hard blue, he could see at first no sign of Tarrell in the last afternoon sunlight. But it would be there, nearing, nearing. Then he caught sight of it, blue, indistinct, occupying almost thirty degrees of sky, drawing close to taking its first bite from the sun.

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As he began his walk, a stronger gust of wind caught the tall tukkas trees lining the route. Their spear-shaped leaves came rattling down, to slither along the paved way at his feet.

An occasional light showed in the houses along the road. People who were too poor to afford a cell in the hibernatorium were having to accommodate themselves in their own homes, barricading themselves as best they could against the forecast snows and floods.

A howler-bowler sounded in the distance. Guthram quickened his pace as the rattle of wheels came closer. Soon the vehicle would be upon him. He looked back. Dim round eyes of headlamps were rapidly drawing near. He discerned the two howlers pulling the carriage, a light two-wheeler. The howlers' necks were stretched forward. They ran with their usual high-stepping gait. Their scant plumage rippled with movement. Behind the first bowler came a second.

Guthram stepped back hurriedly into a sheltering doorway to avoid being run over. The first howler-bowler sped past. As the second howler-bowler came up, it slowed with a screech of brakes. The howlers howled in protest. They gave forth a deep brassy beige note.

The carriage door was flung open. An immense man, clad from head to foot in black fur, jumped out. He rushed at Guthram and seized the boy.

Guthram yelled and struggled. The man wrenched at him so violently that he lost his balance. He was carried kicking and screaming into the recesses of the bowler. The door slammed, a whip cracked, and they were at once off at a great pace.

The man clamped a black hand over Guthram's face to stop his cries.

"Keep quiet, kid! You're mine now, to do what I like with!"

A paralyzing blow landed on the back of his neck.

Guthram was never entirely unconscious. He was aware of a firework display behind his eyelids, where pain and fear collided. He was aware of a monstrous body against his, causing something deeper even than pain. Through a great threshing blackness into an abyss he was thrown.

Something moved. He managed to open one eye. Opening the other eye, he struggled to bring both of them into focus. He discovered he was lying against long brown sticks, his head and part of his body propped against a yielding warmth which occasionally moved. He groaned in misery.

The noise started some movement above him, beyond his sight. There came a kind of high singing, to which he had scarcely the strength to listen. He could not grasp its meaning. After a while, it died away.

Stirring, he got to his knees. There was blood between his legs. He shivered with cold and apprehension. Crawling forward, he found his trousers. Although they had been torn, he managed to draw them on. The high singing began again.

Guthram stood on his own two feet. Light filtered dimly through a grating. He had been lying against two howlers, in a confusion of legs—those brown sticks!—and beaks. Now the great birdlike steeds raised their necks to scrutinize him. Their eyes were large, with slitted pupils. They sang at him. The songs came direct into his head without passing through his ears.

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He had never met a howler. Since they had not harmed him when he was powerless, he saw no reason to fear them. He put out a hand to pat the head of one of them; the head was quickly withdrawn. "I won't hurt you," he said.

They sang the words back at him. "I won't hurt you." This time, he understood the song.

"But you can't speak. You only howl."

"Howling is for misery, for misery. Although we cannot speak, yet you hear our voices."

He was mystified and pleased in a way. But there were more important things on his mind. He wanted to know what had befallen him, and where he was.

The howlers seemed to tell him they were all at the science lord's castle. He could not understand very well; what they sang was so obscure.

They were trying to tell him they had come originally from a great distance. Failing to understand, he began to bang on the door of his prison. He thought, If only my father would come and save me. . .

The door was suddenly flung open. There stood the gigantic man, the very man who had seized Guthram and dragged him into the howler-bowler. And after that, when he was helpless . . . The howlers at once sprang up to their feet and began howling in unison.

Ignoring them, the man said in a deep voice, "So you're recovered, are you? Good. Come on with me, lad, and I will feed you."

This was said not unkindly. Although Guthram shrank back, his hand was seized and he was pulled into the open. The door slammed behind them, shutting off the howling.

Light dazzled him after the dimness of the stable. He shielded his eyes with his free hand.

In response, the man said, with a sort of laugh, "You'll get all the dark you want soon enough."

Still clutching the youth's hand, he set off at great speed across what seemed to Guthram to be a great blank space barricaded with large dark buildings to one side. Every step was such pain for him, he imagined the blood was starting to well up again in his trousers.

"I can't go so fast, sir. My bottom parts are terrible stiff."

"That's to knock the self-image out of you."

Since the pace did not slow, he managed to gasp, "I didn't think I had one of those, sir."

"Well, we'll see."

"Who is the science lord, sir?"

"You'll see."

The man was staring ahead at his goal, walking even faster, but he turned his head to give Guthram a smile.

Guthram saw the man's teeth were gray and irregular. He felt a twinge of liking for him because of that.

They came to a stone building, to enter at a canter. Roaring sounds indicated that the place was full of people. It was not at all like the hibernatorium. The two of them clattered up a flight of spiral stairs, Guthram tripping at every step, until they arrived at a confusing chamber with

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people running about and dishes being carried and a good deal of shouting, mainly from large-sized men at pint-sized youths.

Sunlight flooded into the room through arched windows. Guthram's captor roared at a man for bowls of food, to which the man said respectfully, "Yes, Althuron," before scurrying off.

Althuron sat his grand frame down on a bench and dragged Guthram down against him. He indicated with a sweep of his hand that he should look out of the window.

The sun had a bite out of it. Already, its light was diminishing. Althuron grunted that that bite was the cruel planet Tarrell, just as two bowls full of a yellow mash were set down in front of them.

Guthram stared in awe as the bite increased and the sun diminished. A hush had overwhelmed the room. Everyone was now crowding to the windows. Tarrell was immense, immense and black. Another moment and its great bulk had totally obscured the sun. Darkness rushed in. The world beyond the window went blank. A gust of a united sigh of apprehension escaped from the throats of the watchers.

Electric lights came on in the room, hesitant and dim. Moorn was a small world, short of minerals, and generators consequently scarce.

"Six months of this lousy dark," said Althuron. "Now we must fight." As he spoke, he began ladling the yellow stuff into his mouth, between the gray teeth.

"Can't I go back to my father?" asked Guthram in a whisper.

"I'm just the Conscriptor, son. Keep your mouth shut."

A flimsy pale youth, overhearing this unpromising exchange, eased himself along the bench so that he could speak in Guthram's ear.

"I want my progenitor too. He's a powerful man. He'd get me out of here. It's so unfair."

"We'd better make the best of things," said Guthram, tucking into his mash.

"But it's so unfair," said the pale youth, whom Guthram was already designating mentally as "the whining boy."

Although he felt some contempt for the whiner, his conscience prompted him to offer what consolation he could find.

"Look at it this way," he said, "at least while we're here we don't have to comb our hair."

"It's what happens," Althuron said, evidently thinking in the abstract, between mouthfuls, nodding his head at the whining boy. "We're short of those who don't hibernate. You're needed to fight the enemy."

"Fight!" shrieked the youth. "I've never fought in my life. My progenitor would never allow me to fight . . ."

"Keep your trap shut, kid," the Conscriptor advised. "Get on with your food. Calories protect you against the cold."

With a sob, the whining boy turned away.

Althuron gave Guthram a conspiratorial nudge in the ribs.

"Better look out. I'm glad you're not a wimp. Someone's coming."

Certainly someone was coming, someone of consequence. Bugles announced his coming. Before his arrival, four servitors rushed into the long chamber, savagely making everyone stand up quietly by their tables. No

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more eating, no more talking. Even Althuron had to drop his spoon and stand rigid.

Out of the corner of his mouth, he said, "Science Lord . . ."

Entering through a wide door came a strange figure, gaunt and black robed, escorted by two women bearing flambeaux and two men bearing naked swords. Guthram believed at first that this figure wore a mask. As it drew nearer he realized that the man's skull, ravaged by disease, bore scarcely any flesh. It resembled a death mask, and was as pale as death.

The figure halted in the middle of the chamber. It spoke in an assertive and sepulchral tone, its voice magnified by a hidden microphone.

"For those wretches who do not know me, my name is Holy Clathertam, known as the Invincible. Beware, for you shall know me! I am Lord of Science of Moorn. Now that the Great Darkness is come upon us, we shall arise and protect those who are without power in hibernation.

"You are here, you youths, as pawns in the battle to come. You are called the Expendables. You all have been marked. We shall fight with and overcome the Powers of the Predators. You will meet the Predators in good time.

"Now you will file from here to the parade ground outside. There you will be mustered into squads. We shall then proceed to the ancestral battle field, where stands the great Insulator. This is the order given by me, Holy Clathertam the Invincible. Proceed."

No sooner had the deep ringing voice died away than the occupants of the chamber, Guthram among them, began to leave the shelter of the building. Only Althuron remained behind, arms folded across his chest, saying not a word. Guthram glanced back at him: Althuron smiled his old gray smile, but did not move.

Outside, in the open, over the great parade ground, temperatures were already falling. Frost glittered on the ground. Minute beads of cold fell from the unclouded air. They called it *glit*.

Widely spaced flares partly illumined the expanse of the parade ground. It was marked out in squares, each hardly two hand-spreads in either dimension. The youths each assigned themselves a square, as if pre-ordained. Guthram followed suit.

Orderlies came, bearing thick mantles, one to a youth—to a pawn, as the Invincible had called them. They were quickly handed out, and as quickly thrown over shoulders. As his eyes adjusted to the murk, Guthram saw that, separately, a great body of men stood silent not far distant. Something about them glittered: their helmets and possibly their spears, held rigidly at their sides. There was something about their very silence, their motionlessness, that was chilling.

Came a great howling, the sound echoing against the facades of the buildings. Howler-bowlers came rushing on the scene, each bearing two men, one of them standing clutching the reins and clearly a commander of some sort. When they drew to a halt, the howlers ceased their noise, bowing their beaks to the ground in submission.

The commanders dismounted and began issuing orders. With them went ferocious dogs, snarling and straining at their leashes.

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Guthram heard the faint song of the howlers and understood: they feared the savage hounds, feeling their long legs to be in danger from them.

A hand plucked at Guthram's left arm. A whining voice said, "I don't want to be here. I'm hurting between my legs. I'm bleeding."

"Forget it," Guthram said. "There's probably worse things to come." He was addressing a pallid youth, spotty and stoop-shouldered.

He shook off the detaining hand. But the pallid youth in the neighboring square said, "I thought we were all meant to help each other."

"What gave you that idea?"

The fellow to Guthram's right, overhearing this exchange, advised Guthram to kick the little wimp. Guthram did not respond.

Amid shouts from the commanders and furious barking from the dogs, the contingent of Expendables began to move forward. The army of men with spears marched behind with a solid thudding tramp tramp tramp. Ahead of them all went a commander in a howler-bowler, leading the way, a torch flaming and smoking in the clutch of his assistant.

The great dark body of youths and men marched ever eastwards. The pace increased when they were covering level ground, and slowed when they were traversing rough land or scaling a hill. A halt was called after two hours, when most of the youths were exhausted. So cold was the ground, they could not fling themselves down to rest, as they would have wished.

Guthram stared upwards at a remarkable phenomenon. Amidst the inchoate rash of stars which formed an archway right across the sky, a strange spiral of light was rising from the eastern horizon as the army progressed. In its wider part, the ribbon was faintly green; where it thinned away into distance, it appeared more an elusive mauve or violet. He stared and stared, puzzled. No thought occurred to him. Eventually, he grew dizzy from staring.

They were on the move again. The next two-hour spell was more taxing than the first. Consciousness was confined to keeping the legs moving and the feet planted firmly on the deeply frosted ground, stride after stride. The cold became more intense, biting the ears, chilling the cheeks until teeth seemed to freeze. A chill wind blew, moaning among the iced bushes which impeded their march. The wasted leaves, scurrying across the ground in the breeze, tinkled stiffly against one another.

At last came the order to halt. The Expendables were made to go in file into a ruinous stone building. It could have been a castle or a palace. Its cold embraced them like a coat. It contained only relics of what had been furniture. Small insects had eaten most of it away. At least the dismal place offered shelter of a sort. Although the flagstones on which they threw themselves down were numbing to the bone, they could rest their weary limbs.

Bowls of a thick soup were served to them. They drank. The soup tasted disgusting. One of the Expendables complained to a nearby commander.

"Drink it down," he ordered. "There's medicine in it which will save your blood from freezing."

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"It's disgusting."

"I said to drink it. You want to become an icicle? Temperatures are sinking down to zero."

They had no alternative but to do as they were ordered—and immediately fell asleep after drinking.

This routine of march and rest and march again was followed unbrokenly over and over, until the youths remembered nothing but the rigors of the journey. Some of them died on the way. Guthram merely became hardened. They breathed through mufflers wrapped about their faces.

Sometimes they passed through darkened villages. Here, the people were so poor they had no hibernatoria in which to flock for refuge. Instead, they had barricaded themselves into their cottages and buried themselves under rugs.

The commanders encouraged looting for food. When the cottages were broken into, scant supplies were found: the majority of Moornians passed the long eclipse in deep unconsciousness, needing nothing in the way of nourishment. Disappointed marauders quit the vulnerable homes, leaving them wide open and their sleeping inhabitants exposed to the increasingly hostile elements.

Guthram's contingent had found cans of meat stored under a counter in a small shop. They stood under a tall tukkas tree to make a hurried meal, wolfing the food down. A fire had been built from fallen branches. The contingent stood with their boots almost in the glowing embers, chewing desperately. The tukkas groaned above their heads. A sparkling fall of glit occurred; it was as though the atmosphere itself was freezing.

Of a sudden, the tree split with a tremendous crack. The rapid decline in temperature had acted like an axe. From top to base, the trunk tore itself in two. The lesser half began to fall.

Yelling a warning, Guthram dropped his stolen ration and ran for safety. Others followed.

The half tree fell, slowly at first, then faster. It crashed onto the roof of a cottage and shattered into splinters, almost as if it were made of glass.

From the cottage no movement came. The hibernators inside died without knowing it.

The winter of the Great Darkness grew more intense. The strange ribbon of light rose higher in the eastern sky, to become more vivid, while, during rest periods, the howlers sang their whisps of song. Guthram tried to interpret the songs before he slept.

Moorn continued its axial rotation. Sometimes, clear sky alone ruled above them, crossed by the speedy trace of Barlits, the moon's own shard of moon. At other times, the sky remained dominated by the bulk of the gas giant Tarrell, barring them from the sun. The face of that gloomy object was lit occasionally by violent electrical storms, thousands of kilometers in extent, flashing across the equator of the planet.

Finally came a prolonged march for the assembled armies. Their way was lit by an auroral display which exploded suddenly into the skies overhead, obliterating the stars with curtains of green, red, and yellow light. The marchers halted. Some flung themselves to the frozen ground in terror. Yet almost immediately the colors overhead dulled and were gone.

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The darkness enveloping the Expendables seemed even deeper than before. Goaded on by the yells of the commanders in their bowlers, they continued their progress.

Their progress was always noisy, for the howling of the howlers often set the commanders' dogs barking furiously.

The terrain rose slowly, kilometer after kilometer, to a crest. Here the multitude paused, to look down into a great hollow bowl of land, stretching till the darkness hid its far limits.

Most remarkably, an immense metal object, self-illuminating, stood almost at the center of the bowl. Its sides were as elaborately buttressed about as the exterior of a cathedral. From a projection on its upper surface curled the strange ribbon of light, up through the sky, into space, shimmering, until sight of it was lost in interstellar distance.

When they were not pulling bowlers, the howlers began their sub-audible singing, sweet to Guthram's ear. The songs of the howlers became more comprehensible the more he heard of them. Now he was beginning to understand whole phrases, although their concepts were beyond him. With many words, he could only guess at their meaning.

"In this mighty thing (?) (*somebody*) came here to this (*world*) . . . Our time trail from the engines (?) shows (*us*) the way they journeyed . . . This time trail will remain (blank) . . . The engines (?) work (*by utilizing*) time. Time is (*a greater*) power than space. Time (*permeates everything*) continually. . ."

Guthram lay awake, marveling at things he could not comprehend.

The whining youth, who lay next to him, said, "You are not asleep. I bet it's because you're scared."

"Shut up."

"You'd better be scared. I'm scared. We are going to be in a battle tomorrow and I am sure I am going to be killed."

"Shut up. You will be killed if you take that attitude."

"I wish I was home with my ma."

"Well you're not, so shut *up*!"

And the howlers had another song, as puzzling as the first.

"In the mighty thing (?) came (*some creatures like us*). But small (?). They did not wish to (*travel*) here. They were merely (*things to eat*) on the way (?). They did not wish (*to be eaten*). Many were (*eaten*). After they (*landed*) here, the survivors (?) managed to (*escape*) from the mighty thing. They ran away. (*Things changed.*) Their (*descendants*) grew (?) but we were (*captured*). We are now (*miserable*) sort of (*prisoners*) (*harnessed*) to the bowlers . . ."

He fell asleep trying to puzzle it all out.

The eclipsing dark remained as deep as ever, the cold as intense, when what was ironically named the Dawn Call roused them.

The Expendables rose shivering, clustering together for a trace of warmth. The hot soup was served up and after that, unusually, heated helmets were issued. Then they were marched outside, where a gale was blowing. The wind bit in their clothes and their bones.

Through watering eyes, they saw that a distant body of men or youths

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was forming up, marked by flickering torches. It was the enemy they were about to confront.

Riding a metal-encased howler-bowler, the great Invincible arrived on the scene to address his forces.

Holy Clathertam, muffled so that his skull of a face could scarcely be seen, spoke to them through a loudspeaker.

"I am Holy Clathertam the Invincible. You will do well to fear me more than our enemies. I am the Lord of Science. Today you shall fight and win a battle against the Expendables of the Powers of the Predators. On the outcome of this battle depends the issue of which side shall have First Strike in a greater battle, to be fought shortly with real men.

"We the Good who fight Evil claim this territory and this mighty Space/Time Insulator machine you see here for our own.

"The Insulator arrived many years ago from a star system far distant. It was powered by a force we know only as time-insulation, a very advanced technology.

"The humans who manned this Insulator were all killed by the Powers of the Predators. Yes, they were easily killed even by primitive brutes like the Predators, because they did not understand evil, and so were powerless. Those humans were persons of great wisdom, acquired through the ages. Thus we lost valuable knowledge. So we fight the Predators annually, here at this neutral place. According to strict rules.

"You must be clear about the hazards of the squares on which you will fight. The ground is becoming so cold, dipping towards absolute zero, that thermal variations sink slowly lower, permitting quantum fluctuations to prevail. These minute fluctuations may induce a phase state transition between the two competing energy values of space and time. These energy values may separate out—may split away from one another like a dead tree. It is possible that time may prevail over space. There will then be a lethal phase change.

"Now. You will proceed in orderly fashion to your appointed squares. Any Expendable trying to escape this duty will be killed at once. You must conform rigidly to the rules of the battleground. You may move forward only to an empty square two squares ahead in the columns to right or left of you. You may attempt to stab and kill only an opponent on the neighboring square to your right—unless you are positioned on the extreme right flank, when you stab only ahead. If you move through the entire square-board without being killed yourself, then you are victorious and will live to fight again.

"Remember these rules. Now collect your spears."

The whining boy stared white-faced about him.

"I don't understand. I can't understand them rules."

"What's it matter?" sneered the bully boy. "You're going to get killed anyway!"

Guthram said nothing, repeating to himself, Move to empty square two squares ahead. Stab only to the right. But who can stab me? The ones to the left or to the right?

They paraded past servitors who handed each Expendable a spear or short sword. Guthram chose a short sword as being more maneuverable.

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They moved to a vast checkerboard and took up positions, each youth to one square.

A bugle sounded. They advanced to meet the enemy, goaded forward by commanders shouting from the sidelines. The whole square was immense, stretching before the structure the Invincible had called the Space/Time Insulator.

The enemy force, the Predators, moved forward in a solid wave, square by square, spear and sword points glinting. They resembled ghosts of some kind, being garbed in white hooded cloaks. Guthram saw immediately that his side, garbed in black cloaks, had an advantage: they were less easily seen in the blackness, lit only by flares on the sidelines.

And there was another advantage. The Expendables had the strong wind at their backs. The advancing foe faced into the wind. Some were already attempting to keep their cloaks about them, and thus not intently observing the enemy. Guthram's spirits rose.

He called to the whining boy, "Be of good courage! We shall win!"

There was no response.

The one on the right. The one on the right. Watch for the one on the left. The one ahead . . .

The front ranks met. Some youths on both sides fell. Rear ranks moved on, most silent, some shouting. Some wounded screaming.

The one ahead! Guthram saw his eyes glinting, preparing to strike. Instead, Guthram struck to his right, and then quickly again, moving over into a square already cleared, two ahead.

All moved like machines, like chess pieces, until they fell.

Guthram had seen that he might in four or five sideways moves gain the right flank of the board, where—under the rules of this strangely conducted struggle—he would be permitted to stab ahead. Down went another white-clad youth, dying under his blade.

An advancing opponent was about to strike. Guthram rammed his blade into the ribs of the enemy on his right, usurping his square quickly, so that his adversary had to pass him by, and quickly slipped into the next square ahead.

The formalized carnage continued, part-muffled, part ringing on the frozen ground, always punctuated by the barking of the hounds on the perimeters. Both sides advanced, men sometimes being isolated ahead of their comrades. There was never time to look about. Quick wits, quick blades, a never-tiring arm, were needed.

The whining boy went down, pouring blood from a stomach wound. Guthram slayed two more pawns and gained the right hand line of squares. Here he merely had to attend to those ahead, advancing square by square towards him. Square by square he dispatched them.

So at last, in triumph, he crossed the entire board. He raised a fist in triumph or relief. He was a man!

Exhausted, he leaned against a tree, feeling his sweat freeze on his body. In horror at the whole business, he vomited up the contents of his insides. He stood there, forehead against the tree, shivering.

Only after a moment did he realize what he was doing. He tried to pull away. His forehead had already frozen to the trunk of the tree. With a

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mighty effort, he wrenched himself loose, tearing the skin from his forehead as he did so. Blood blinded him, until he could bind up his head with a kerchief.

Other survivors came to stand near him. He was sick with pain and could say nothing. Under half the number who had set out had survived. Nobody spoke. Several youths sobbed openly, hiding their faces in their hands.

The commanders were counting bodies, to determine which force had won.

One of the surviving Expendables nudged Guthram.

"Can you still see? Then look up yonder—on the hill! There!"

Above them, on the lip of the hollow, a half-dozen Predators were maneuvering a cannon of some variety into position. The cannon's open snout was pointed towards where the Insulator stood.

At that moment, the commanders shouted that the Holy Clathertam had won the primary battle by causing two hundred and thirty-one deaths against only one hundred and ninety deaths of his Expendables. The commanders then cheered. The surviving Expendables made not a sound, and merely looked dejected.

The newly positioned cannon roared.

The Insulator was struck fair and square by the ball.

It expanded in a white sheet of destruction. As for the great ribbon of something like light: at one moment it was writhing into space. At the next—

The controlling engines being destroyed, space and time separated violently, as foretold by the Lord of Science. White light filled everything and everywhere. It seemed to entomb the armed soldiery. They became immobile.

Time in that location was destroyed.

There remained only space, crippled by division. Everything on the dark side of Moorn was transfixed, incapable of movement or life. The fiercest warrior stood like a glass ornament on a shelf. Here, time was no more.

No longer could a clock tick or a bell chime.

Birds in flight remained suspended in the air.

Insects climbing a stone remained still as stone.

Hounds straining at their leashes continued ever to strain.

Howlers high-stepping and howling remained in mid-step and mid-howl, with no sound.

There was no sound.

No sight.

Not a breath of wind.

Not a whisper of whisker grew on a chin.

All biological things were stilled. All biological action halted. Breath, heart, thought—in every human case, these functions ceased to exist. All things which inhabited space were robbed of the vitality that time alone propagated. Neither were they dead, for death also is a creature of time. They simply became without viability.

There they stood, rooted, unmoving as stalagmites. Those that looked

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ahead, looked ahead without seeing. Those that had opened their mouths to speak, remained with mouths open. Those whose wounds bled, stayed with wounds unbleeding. Joy, misery, triumph, defeat—all were no more.

In that place was only a mighty tableau of stillness. It might have been a great canvas painted by an artist in oils, so drained was it of reality.

This terrible stasis remained while Moorn itself continued to turn on its axis and to hasten in its orbit. Yet the scene on the battlefield remained without benefit of time, without change. Nor did the torches burn out, or their flames so much as flicker.

The solar system never ceased its various motions or its bodies their balance between motion and gravity. The Moon Moorn did not remain forever excluded from the sun by its giant primary. On its course, Moorn reached a point where once more a beam of sunlight shot from behind the shoulder of Tarrell.

It happened that the first rays of the returning sun shone direct on the Insulator where it was in stasis.

Change came. With change, time burst violently back into place.

The Insulator continued to explode as if there had been no long pause in its violence.

Birds flopped from the sky. Insects fell from stones. Howlers completed their howl. Dogs finished their bark and barked anew.

And humanity took another breath.

Guthram felt his painful forehead and looked about him in bewilderment. He turned round in a complete circle, and then turned again, completely disoriented.

Everyone of either side in the battle experienced similar confusion, and could not speak. The commanders—even the Invincible himself—were similarly struck dumb by a metaphysical shock. They knew only that something unprecedented had happened, and could not grasp it.

Slowly, people began to move; first, their lungs, then their legs. They gathered their cloaks about their living bodies, looked up at the sun—now almost fully restored to wholeness—and began to walk again. As someone hoping to learn a new subject can learn nothing if he knows nothing of it; time was a subject beyond all their understandings.

Now that again the sun was a body entire, Tarrell faded from the skies. Warmth and brilliance awoke the world. Streams and rivers began to flow once more. Fish jumped in the waters, animals moved in the forests. Birds sought again to nest. The forests began to prepare to clothe themselves in leaves again.

Guthram lifted his arms to the sunlight. Forgetting his pain, he began to cheer. Others near him joined in. The joy was contagious. Soon, everyone was cheering, raising their arms and cheering for all they were worth.

When Guthram finally made his way back to Vurndrol City, it was to find his mother and sister Miney had emerged from hibernation; they and his procreator were well. Fleebis embraced her son heartily. "You need a good wash, son," she said. "And your hair needs a good comb."

Miney said, jumping about, "Too bad you missed the great Thank—what was it called, ma?"

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Her mother told her it was the Great Thanksgiving of Light.

"Too bad you missed it, Guthy. A man gave me a doll. And we had sweets. The sweets were all gold."

Castener came forward and patted the boy's shoulder affectionately. He applied some cream to Guthram's forehead.

"You're a man now, Guthram," he said, proudly. He worked in the cream with tenderness.

Guthram's jaw set stubbornly. "If being a man means looting and being subject to the orders of others, and letting the weak die, and killing people, then I have no wish to be a man."

"You need a rest, old fellow," said Castener, displeased by this outburst. And then, to change the subject, "By the way, believe it or not, a new planet has recently arrived in our system."

They went together that night, after Guthram had bathed and rested, to examine the new planet through Castener's telescope. It appeared to Guthram a miracle of beauty. Clouds moved in stately progression over its blue face. It would heed no eclipses, it would need no hibernations.

Suddenly the songs of the howlers came back fresh in his memory. Now he thought he understood them better. Their meaning became clearer.

He told his father haltingly that the visiting Insulator had been time-powered—for how else could it have crossed many light years?—and had remained connected to its parent planet by the time-ribbon stretching through space. Destroying the link had inevitably propelled the parent planet through space/time to the power site.

Castener tapped some keys on his scanner.

"I'll have to work out the physics of that," he said with a chuckle. "Clearly, it would require a delocalized wavefunction."

But Guthram thought he knew what had happened. Moreover, he recalled that that parent planet had been inhabited by beings of superior knowledge and wisdom.

"We need to get in touch with them," he promised himself. O

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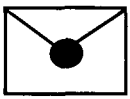

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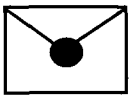

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WELCOME TO OLYMPUS, MR. HEARST

Kage Baker

Kage Baker's recent appearance as Guest of Honor at ArmadilloCon coincided with the release of her first fantasy novel, *The Anvil of the World,* from Tor Books. Her current projects include a limited-edition chapbook novella from Golden Gryphon Press. She resides in Pismo Beach, California.

Opening Credits: 1926

"TAKE TEN!" called the director. Lowering his megaphone, he settled back in his chair. It sank deeper into the sand under his weight, and irritably settling again he peered out at the stallion galloping across the expanse of dune below him, its burnoosed rider clinging against the scouring blast of air from the wind machines.

"Pretty good so far. . . ." chanted the assistant director. Beside him, Rudolph Valentino (in a burnoose that matched the horseman's) nodded grimly. They watched as the steed bore its rider up one wave of sand, down the next, nearer and nearer to that point where they might cut away—

"Uh-oh," said the grip. From the sea behind them a real wind traveled forward across the sand, tearing a palm frond from the seedy-looking prop trees around the Sheik's Camp set and sending it whirling in front of the stallion. The stallion pulled up short and began to dance wildly. After a valiant second or so the rider flew up in the air and came down on his head in the sand, arms and legs windmilling.

"Oh, Christ," the director snarled. "CUT! KILL THE WIND!"

"YOU OKAY, LEWIS?" yelled the script boy.

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The horseman sat up unsteadily and pulled swathing folds of burnoose up off his face. He held up his right hand, making an okay sign.

"SET UP FOR TAKE ELEVEN!" yelled the assistant director. The horseman clambered to his feet and managed to calm his mount; taking its bridle he slogged away with it, back across the sand to their mark. Behind them the steady salt wind erased the evidence of their passage.

"This wind is not going to stop, you know," Valentino pointed out gloomily. He stroked the false beard that gave him all the appearance of middle age he would ever wear.

"Ain't there any local horses that ain't spooked by goddam palm leaves?" the grip wanted to know.

"Yeah. Plowhorses," the director told them. "Look, we paid good money for an Arabian stallion. Do you hear the man complaining? I don't hear him complaining."

"I can't even *see* him," remarked the assistant director, scanning the horizon. "Jeez, you don't guess he fell down dead or anything, out there?"

But there, up out of the sand came the horse and his rider, resuming position on the crest of the far dune.

"Nah. See?" the director said. "The little guy's a pro." He lifted the megaphone, watching as Lewis climbed back into the saddle. The script boy chalked in the update and held up the clapboard for the camera. *Crack!*

"WIND MACHINES GO—AND—TAKE ELEVEN!"

Here they came again, racing the wind and the waning light, over the lion-colored waves as the camera whirred, now over the top of the last dune and down, disappearing—

Disappearing—

The grip and the assistant director groaned. Valentino winced.

"I don't see them, Mr. Fitzmaurice," the script boy said.

"So where are they?" yelled the director. "CUT! CUT, AND KILL THE GODDAM WIND."

"Sorry!" cried a faint voice, and a second later Lewis came trudging around the dune, leading the jittering stallion. "I'm afraid we had a slight spill back there."

"WRANGLERS! Jadaan took a fall," called the assistant director in horrified tones, and from the camp on the beach a half-dozen wranglers came running. They crowded around the stallion solicitously. Lewis left him to their care and struggled on toward the director.

The headpiece of his burnoose had come down around his neck, and his limp fair hair fluttered in the wind, making his dark makeup—what was left after repeated face-first impact with dunes—look all the more incongruous. He spat out sand and smiled brightly, tugging off his spirit-gummed beard.

"Of course, I'm ready to do another take if you are, Mr. Fitzmaurice," Lewis said.

"No," said Valentino. "We will kill him or we will kill the horse, or both."

"Oh, screw it," the director decided. "We've got enough good stuff in the can. Anyway the light's going. Let's see what we can do with that take, as far as it went."

Lewis nodded and waded on through the sand, intent on getting out of

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his robes; Valentino stepped forward to put a hand on his shoulder. Lewis squinted up at him, blinking sand from his lashes.

"You work very hard, my friend," Valentino said. "But you should not try to ride horses. It is painful to watch."

"Oh—er—thank you. It's fun being Rudolph Valentino for a few hours, all the same," said Lewis, and from out of nowhere he produced a fountain pen. "I don't suppose I might have your autograph, Mr. Valentino?"

"Certainly," said Valentino, looking vainly around for something to autograph. From another nowhere Lewis produced a copy of the shooting script, and Valentino took it. "Your name is spelled?"

"L-e-w-i-s, Mr. Valentino. Right there?" he suggested. "Right under where it says *The Son of the Sheik?*" He watched with a peculiarly stifled glee as Valentino signed: *For my "other self" Lewis. Rudolph Valentino.*

"There," said Valentino, handing him the script. "No more falls on the head, yes?"

"Thank you so much. It's very kind of you to be worried, but it's all right, you know," Lewis replied. "I can take a few tumbles. I'm a professional stunt man, after all."

He tucked the script away in his costume and staggered down to the water's edge, where the extras and crew were piling into an old stakebed truck. The driver was already cranking up the motor, anxious to begin his drive back to Pismo Beach before the tide turned and they got bogged down again.

Valentino watched Lewis go, shaking his head.

"Don't worry about that guy, Rudy," the director told him, knocking sand out of his megaphone. "I know he looks like a pushover, but he never gets hurt, and I mean never."

"But luck runs out, like sand." Valentino smiled wryly and waved at the dunes stretching away behind them, where the late slanting sunlight cast his shadow to the edge of the earth. "Doesn't it? And that one, I think he has the look of a man who will die young."

Which was a pretty ironic thing for Valentino to say, considering that he'd be dead himself within the year and that Lewis happened to be, on that particular day in 1926, just short of his eighteen-hundred and-twenty-third birthday.

If we immortals had birthdays, anyway.

Flash Forward: 1933

"Oh, look, we're at Pismo Beach," exclaimed Lewis, leaning around me to peer at it. The town was one hotel and a lot of clam stands lining the highway. "Shall we stop for clams, Joseph?"

"Are you telling me you didn't get enough clams when you worked on *Son of the Sheik*?" I grumbled, groping in my pocket for another mint Lifesaver. The last thing I wanted right now was food. Usually I can eat anything (and have, believe me) but this job was giving me butterflies like crazy.

"Possibly," Lewis said, standing up in his seat to get a better view as we

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rattled past, bracing himself with a hand on the Ford's windshield. The wind hit him smack in the face and his hair stood out all around his head. "But it would be nice to toast poor old Rudy's shade, don't you think?"

"You want to toast him? Here." I pulled out my flask and handed it to Lewis. "It would be nice to be on time for Mr. Hearst too, you know?"

Lewis slid back down into his seat and had a sip of warm gin. He made a face.

"*Ave atque vale,* old man," he told Valentino's ghost. "You're not actually nervous about this, are you, Joseph?"

"Me, nervous?" I bared my teeth. "Hell no. Why would I be nervous meeting one of the most powerful men in the world?"

"Well, precisely," Lewis had another sip of gin, made another face. "Thank God you won't be needing this bootlegger any more. *Vale* Volstead Act too! You must have known far more powerful men in your time, mustn't you? You worked for a Byzantine emperor once, if I'm not mistaken."

"Three or four of 'em," I corrected him. "And believe me, not one had anything like the pull of William Randolph Hearst. Not when you look at the big picture. Anyway, Lewis, the rules of the whole game are different now. You think a little putz like Napoleon could rule the world today? You think Hitler'd be getting anywhere without the media? Mass communication is where the real power is, kiddo."

"He's only a mortal, after all," Lewis said. "Put it into perspective! We're simply motoring up to someone's country estate to spend a pleasant weekend with entertaining people. There will be fresh air and lovely views. There will be swimming, riding, and tennis. There will be fine food and decent drink, at least one hopes so—"

"Don't count on booze," I said. "Mr. Hearst doesn't like drunks."

"—and all we have to do is accomplish a simple document drop for the Company," Lewis went on imperturbably, patting the briefcase in which he'd brought the autographed Valentino script. "A belated birthday present for the master of the house, so to speak."

"That's all you have to do," I replied. "I have to actually negotiate with the guy."

Lewis shrugged, conceding my point. "Though what was that story you were telling me the other night, about you and that pharaoh, what was his name—? It's not as though there will be jealous courtiers ordering our executions, after all."

I made a noise of grudging agreement. I couldn't explain to Lewis why this job had me so on edge. Probably I wasn't sure. I lie to myself a lot, see. I started doing it about thirteen thousand years ago and it's become a habit, like chain-sucking mints to ward off imaginary nervous indigestion.

Immortals have a lot of little habits like that.

We cruised on up the coast in my Model A, through the cow town of San Luis Obispo. This was where Mr. Hearst's honored guests arrived in his private rail car, to be met at the station by his private limousines. From there they'd be whisked away to that little architectural folly known to later generations as Hearst Castle, but known for now just as The Ranch or, if you were feeling romantic, *La Cuesta Encantada.*

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You've never been there? Gee, poor you. Suppose for a moment you owned one of the more beautiful hills in the world, with a breathtaking view of mountains and sea. Now suppose you decided to build a house on top of it, and had all the money in the world to spend on making that house the place of your wildest dreams, no holds barred and no expense spared, with three warehouses full of antiques to furnish the place.

Hell yes, you'd do it; anybody would. What would you do then? If you were William Randolph Hearst, you'd invite guests up to share your enjoyment of the place you'd made. But not just any guests. You could afford to lure the best minds of a generation up there to chat with you, thinkers and artists, Einsteins and Thalbergs, Huxleys and G.B. Shaws. And if you had a blonde mistress who worked in the movies, you got her to invite her friends too: Gable and Lombard, Bette Davis, Marie Dressler, Buster Keaton, Harpo Marx, Charlie Chaplin.

And the occasional studio small fry like Lewis and me, after I'd done a favor for Marion Davies and asked for an invitation in return. The likes of us didn't get the private railroad car treatment. We had to drive all the way up from Hollywood on our own steam. I guess if Mr. Hearst had any idea who was paying him a visit, he'd have sent a limo for us too; but the Company likes to play its cards close to the vest.

And we didn't look like a couple of immortal cyborg representatives of an all-powerful twenty-fourth-century Company, anyway. I appear to be an ordinary guy, kind of dark and compact (okay, *short*) and Lewis . . . well, he's good-looking, but he's on the short side too. It's always been Company policy for its operatives to blend in with the mortal population, which is why nobody in San Luis Obispo or Morro Bay or Cayucos wasted a second glance on two average cyborg joes in a new Ford zipping along the road.

Anyway, we passed through little nowhere towns-by-the-sea and rolling windswept seacoast, lots of California scenery that was breathtaking, if you like scenery. Lewis did, and kept exclaiming over the wildflowers and cypress trees. I just crunched Pep-O-Mints and kept driving. Seventeen miles before we got anywhere near Mr. Hearst's castle, we were already on his property.

What you noticed first was a distant white something on a green hilltop: two pale towers and not much more. I remembered medieval hilltowns in Spain and France and Italy, and so did Lewis, because he nudged me and chuckled:

"Rather like advancing on Le Monastier, eh? Right about now I'd be practicing compliments for the lord or the archbishop or whoever, and hoping I'd brought enough lute strings. What about you?"

"I'd be praying I'd brought along enough cash to bribe whichever duke it was I had to bribe," I told him, popping another Lifesaver.

"It's not the easiest of jobs, is it, being a Facilitator?" Lewis said sympathetically. I just shook my head.

The sense of displacement in reality wasn't helped any by the fact that we were now seeing the occasional herd of zebra or yak or giraffe, frolicking in the green meadows beside the road. If a roc had swept over the car and carried off a water buffalo in its talons, it wouldn't have seemed strange. Even Lewis fell silent, and took another shot of gin to fortify himself.

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He had the flask stashed well out of sight, though, by the time we turned right into an unobtrusive driveway and a small sign that said HEARST RANCH. Here we paused at a barred gate, where a mortal leaned out of a shack to peer at us inquiringly.

"Guests of Mr. Hearst's," I shouted, doing my best to look as though I did this all the time.

"Names, please?"

"Joseph C. Denham and Lewis Kensington," we chorused.

He checked a list to be sure we were on it and then, "Five miles an hour, please, and the animals have right-of-way at all times," he told us, as the gates swung wide.

"We're in!" Lewis gave me a gleeful dig in the ribs. I snarled absently and drove across the magic threshold, with the same jitters I'd felt walking under a portcullis into some baron's fortress.

The suspense kept building, too, because the road wound like five miles of corkscrew, climbing all that time, and there were frequent stops at barred gates as we ascended into different species' habitats. Lewis had to get out and open them, nimbly stepping around buffalo-pies and other things that didn't reward close examination, and avoiding the hostile attentions of an ostrich at about the third gate up. Eventually we turned up an avenue of orange trees and flowering oleander.

"Oh, this is very like the south of France," said Lewis. "Don't you think?"

"I guess so," I muttered. A pair of high wrought iron gates loomed in front of us, opening unobtrusively as we rattled through, and we pulled up to the Grand Staircase.

We were met by a posse of ordinary-looking guys in chinos and jackets, who collected our suitcases and made off with them before we'd even gotten out of the car. I managed to avoid yelling anything like "Hey! Come back here with those!" and of course Lewis was already greeting a dignified-looking lady who had materialized from behind a statue. A houseboy took charge of the Model A and drove it off.

". . . Mr. Hearst's housekeeper," the lady was saying. "He's asked me to show you to your rooms. If you'll follow me—? You're in the Casa del Sol."

"Charming," Lewis replied, and I let him take the lead, chatting and being personable with the lady as I followed them up a long sweeping staircase and across a terrace. We paused at the top, and there opening out on my left was the biggest damn Roman swimming pool I've ever seen, and I worked in Rome for a couple of centuries. The statues of nymphs, sea gods et cetera were mostly modern or museum copies. Hearst had not yet imported what was left of an honest-to-gods temple and set it up as a backdrop for poolside fun. He would, though.

Looming above us was the first of the "little guest bungalows." We craned back our heads to look up. It would have made a pretty imposing mansion for anybody else.

"Delightful," Lewis said. "Mediterranean Revival, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," the housekeeper replied, leading us up more stairs. "I believe this is your first visit here, Mr. Kensington? And Mr. Denham?"

"Yeah," I said.

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"Mr. Hearst would like you to enjoy your stay, and has asked that I provide you with all information necessary to make that possible," the housekeeper recited carefully, leading us around the corner of the house to its courtyard. The door at last! And waiting beside it was a Filipino guy in a suit, who bowed slightly at the waist when he saw us.

"This is Jerome," the housekeeper informed us. "He's been assigned to your rooms. If you require anything, you can pick up the service telephone and he'll respond immediately." She unlocked the door and stepped aside to usher us in. Jerome followed silently and vanished through a side door.

As we stood staring at all the antiques and Lewis made admiring noises, the housekeeper continued: "You'll notice Mr. Hearst has furnished much of this suite with his private art collection, but he'd like you to know that the bathroom—just through there, gentlemen—is perfectly up-to-date and modern, with all the latest conveniences, including shower baths."

"How thoughtful," Lewis answered, and transmitted to me: *Are you going to take part in this conversation at all?*

"That's really swell of Mr. Hearst," I said. *I'm even more nervous than I was before, okay?*

The housekeeper smiled. "Thank you. You'll find your bags are already in your assigned bedrooms. Jerome is unpacking for you."

Whoops. "Great," I said. "Where's my room? Can I see it now?"

"Certainly, Mr. Denham," said the housekeeper, narrowing her eyes slightly. She led us through a doorway that had probably belonged to some sixteenth-century Spanish bishop and there was Jerome, laying out the contents of my cheap brown suitcase. My black suitcase sat beside it, untouched.

"If you'll unlock this one, sir, I'll unpack it too," Jerome told me.

"That's okay," I replied, taking the black suitcase and pushing it under the bed. "I'll get that one myself, later."

In the very brief pause that followed, Jerome and the housekeeper exchanged glances, Lewis sighed, and I felt a real need for another Lifesaver. The housekeeper cleared her throat and said, "I hope this room is satisfactory, Mr. Denham?"

"Oh! Just peachy, thanks," I said.

"I'm sure mine is just as nice," Lewis offered. Jerome exited to unpack for him.

"Very good." The housekeeper cleared her throat again. "Now, Mr. Hearst wished you to know that cocktails will be served at seven this evening in the assembly hall, which is in the big house just across the courtyard. He expects to join his guests at Eight; dinner will be served at Nine. After dinner Mr. Hearst will retire with his guests to the theater, where a motion picture will be shown. Following the picture, Mr. Hearst generally withdraws to his study, but his guests are invited to return to their rooms or explore the library." She fixed me with a steely eye. "Alcohol will be served only in the main house, although sandwiches or other light meals can be requested by telephone from the kitchen staff at any hour."

She thinks you've got booze in the suitcase, you know, Lewis transmitted.

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Shut up. I squared my shoulders and tried to look open and honest. Everybody knew that there were two unbreakable rules for the guests up here: no liquor in the rooms and no sex between unmarried couples. Notice I said For The Guests. Mr. Hearst and Marion weren't bound by any rules except the laws of physics.

The housekeeper gave us a few more helpful tidbits like how to find the zoo, tennis court, and stables, and departed. Lewis and I slunk out into the garden, where we paced along between the statues.

"Overall, I don't think that went very well," Lewis observed.

"No kidding," I said, thrusting my hands in my pockets.

"It'll only be a temporary bad impression, you know," Lewis told me helpfully. "As soon as you've made your presentation—"

"Hey! Yoo hoo! Joe! You boys made it up here okay?" cried a bright voice from somewhere up in the air, and we turned for our first full-on eyeful of La Casa Grande in all its massive glory. It looked sort of like a big Spanish cathedral, but surely one for pagans, because there was Marion Davies hanging out a third-story window waving at us.

"Yes, thanks," I called, while Lewis stared. Marion was wearing a dressing gown. She might have been wearing more, but you couldn't tell from this distance.

"Is that your friend? He's *cute*," she yelled. "Looks like Freddie March!"

Lewis turned bright pink. "I'm his stunt double, actually," he called to her, with a slightly shaky giggle.

"What?"

"I'M HIS STUNT DOUBLE."

"Oh," she yelled back. "Okay! Listen, do you want some ginger ale or anything? You know there's no—" she looked naughty and mimed drinking from a bottle, "until tonight."

"YES, GINGER ALE WOULD BE FINE," bawled Lewis.

"I'll have some sent down," Marion said, and vanished into the recesses of La Casa Grande.

We turned left at the next statue and walked up a few steps into the courtyard in front of the house. It was the size of several town squares, big enough to stage the riot scene from *Romeo and Juliet* complete with the Verona Police Department charging in on horseback. All it held at the moment, though, was another fountain and some lawn chairs. In one of them, Greta Garbo sat moodily peeling an orange.

"Hello, Greta," I said, wondering if she'd remember me. She just gave me a look and went on peeling the orange. She remembered me, all right.

Lewis and I sat down a comfortable distance from her, and a houseboy appeared out of nowhere with two tall glasses of White Rock over ice.

"Marion Davies said I was cute," Lewis reminded me, looking pleased. Then his eyebrows swooped together in the middle. "That's not good, though, is it? For the mission? What if Mr. Hearst heard her? Ye gods, she was shouting it at the top of her lungs."

"I don't think it's going to be any big deal," I told him wearily, sipping my ginger ale. Marion thought a lot of people were cute, and didn't care who heard her say so.

We sat there in the sunshine, and the ice in our drinks melted away. Gar-

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bo ate her orange. Doves crooned sleepily in the carillon towers of the house and I thought about what I was going to say to William Randolph Hearst.

Pretty soon the other guests started wandering up, and Garbo wouldn't talk to them, either. Clark Gable sat on the edge of the fountain and got involved in a long conversation with a sandy-haired guy from Paramount about their mutual bookie. One of Hearst's five sons arrived with his girlfriend. He tried to introduce her to Garbo, who answered in monosyllables, until at last he gave it up and they went off to swim in the Roman pool. A couple of friends of Marion's from the days before talkies, slightly threadbare guys named Charlie and Laurence who looked as though they hadn't worked lately, got deeply involved in a discussion of Greek mythology.

I sat there and looked up at the big house and wondered where Hearst was, and what he was doing. Closing some million-dollar media deal? Giving some senator or congressman voting instructions? Placing an order with some antique dealer for the contents of an entire library from some medieval duke's palace?

He did stuff like that, Mr. Hearst, which was one of the reasons the Company was interested in him.

I was distracted from my uneasy reverie when Constance Talmadge arrived, gaining on forty now but still as bright and bouncy as when she'd played the Mountain Girl in *Intolerance*, and with her Brooklyn accent just as strong. She bounced right over to Lewis, who knew her, and they had a lively chat about old times. Shortly afterward the big doors of the house opened and out came, not the procession of priests and altar boys you'd expect, but Marion in light evening dress.

"Hello, everybody," she hollered across the fountain. "Sorry to keep you waiting, but you know how it is—Hearst come, Hearst served!"

There were nervous giggles and you almost expected to see the big house behind her wince, but she didn't care. She came out and greeted everybody warmly—well, almost everybody, Garbo seemed to daunt even Marion—and then welcomed us in through the vast doorway, into the inner sanctum.

"Who's a first-timer up here?" she demanded, as we crossed the threshold. "I know you are, Joe, and your friend—? Get a load of this floor." She pointed to the mosaic tile in the vestibule. "Know where that's from? Pompeii! Can you beat it? People actually died on this floor."

If she was right, I had known some of them. It didn't improve my mood.

The big room beyond was cool and dark after the brilliance of the courtyard. Almost comfortable, too: it had contemporary sofas and overstuffed chairs, little ash trays on brass stands. If you didn't mind the fact that it was also about a mile long and full of Renaissance masterpieces, with a fireplace big enough to roast an ox and a coffered ceiling a mile up in the air, it was sort of cozy. Here, as in all the other rooms, were paintings and statues representing the Madonna and Child. It seemed to be one of Mr. Hearst's favorite images.

We milled around aimlessly until servants came out bearing trays of drinks, at which time the milling became purposeful as hell. We converged on those trays like piranhas. The Madonna beamed down at us all, smiling her blessing.

The atmosphere livened up a lot after that. Charlie sat down at a piano

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and began to play popular tunes. Gable and Laurence and the guy from Paramount found a deck of cards and started a poker game. Marion worked the rest of the crowd like the good hostess she was, making sure that everybody had a drink and nobody was bored.

The Hearst kid and his girlfriend came in with wet hair. A couple of Hearst's executives (slimy-looking bastards) came in too, saw Garbo and hurried over to try to get her autograph. A gaunt and imposing grande dame with two shrieking little mutts made an entrance, and Marion greeted her enthusiastically; she was some kind of offbeat novelist who'd had one of her books optioned, and had come out to Hollywood to work on the screenplay.

I roamed around the edges of the vast room, scanning for the secret panel that concealed Hearst's private elevator. Lewis was gallantly dancing the Charleston with Connie Talmadge. Marion made for them, towing the writer along.

"—And this is Dutch Talmadge, you remember her? And this is, uh, what was your name, sweetie?" Marion waved at Lewis.

"Lewis Kensington," he said, as the music tinkled to a stop. The pianist paused to light a cigarette.

"Lewis! That's it. And you're even cuter up close," said Marion, reaching out and pinching his cheek. "Isn't he? Anyway you're Industry too, aren't you, Lewis?"

"Only in a minor sort of way," Lewis demurred. "I'm a stunt man."

"That just means you're worth the money they pay you, honey," Marion told him. "Unlike some of these blonde bimbos with no talent, huh?" She whooped with laughter at her own expense. "Lewis, Dutch, this is Cartimandua Bryce! You know? She writes those wonderful spooky romances."

The imposing-looking lady stepped forward. The two chihuahuas did their best to lunge from her arms and tear out Lewis' throat, but she kept a firm grip on them.

"A-and these are her little dogs," added Marion unnecessarily, stepping back from the yappy armful.

"My familiars," Cartimandua Bryce corrected her with a saturnine smile. "Actually, they are old souls who have re-entered the flesh on a temporary basis for purposes of the spiritual advancement of others."

"Oh," said Connie.

"Okay," said Marion.

"This is Conqueror Worm," Mrs. Bryce offered the smaller of the two bug-eyed monsters, "and this is Tcho-Tcho."

"How nice," said Lewis gamely, and reached out in an attempt to shake Tcho-Tcho's tiny paw. She bared her teeth at him and screamed frenziedly. Some animals can tell we're not mortals. It can be inconvenient.

Lewis withdrew his hand in some haste. "I'm sorry. Perhaps the nice doggie's not used to strangers?"

"It isn't that—" Mrs. Bryce stared fixedly at Lewis. "Tcho-Tcho is attempting to communicate with me telepathically. She senses something unusual about you, Mr. Kensington."

If she can tell the lady you're a cyborg, she's one hell of a dog, I transmitted.

Oh, shut up, Lewis transmitted back. "Really?" he said to Mrs. Bryce. "Gosh, isn't that interesting?"

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But Mrs. Bryce had closed her eyes, I guess the better to hear what Tcho-Tcho had to say, and was frowning deeply. After a moment's uncomfortable silence, Marion turned to Lewis and said, "So, you're Freddie March's stunt double? Gee. What's that like, anyway?"

"I just take falls. Stand in on lighting tests. Swing from chandeliers," Lewis replied. "The usual." Charlie resumed playing: *I'm the Sheik of Araby.*

"He useta do stunts for Valentino, too," Constance added. "I remember."

"You doubled for Rudy?" Marion's smiled softened. "Poor old Rudy."

"I always heard Valentino was a faggot," chortled the man from Paramount. Marion rounded on him angrily.

"For your information, Jack, Rudy Valentino was a real man," she told him. "He just had too much class to chase skirts all the time!"

"Soitain people could loin a whole lot from him," agreed Connie, with the scowl of disdain she'd used to face down Old Babylon's marriage market in *Intolerance.*

"I'm just telling you what I heard," protested the man from Paramount.

"Maybe," Gable told him, looking up from his cards. "But did you ever hear that expression, *Say nothing but good of the dead*? Now might be a good time to dummy up, pal. That or play your hand."

Mrs. Bryce, meanwhile, had opened her eyes and was gazing on Lewis with a disconcerting expression.

"Mr. Kensington," she announced with a throaty quaver, "Tcho-Tcho informs me you are a haunted man."

Lewis looked around nervously. "Am I?"

"Tcho-Tcho can perceive the spirit of a soul struggling in vain to speak to you. You are not sufficiently tuned to the cosmic vibrations to hear him," Mrs. Bryce stated.

Tell him to try another frequency, I quipped.

"Well, that's just like me, I'm afraid." Lewis shrugged, palms turned out. "I'm terribly dense that way, you see. Wouldn't know a cosmic vibration if I tripped over one."

Cosmic vibrations, my ass. I knew what she was doing; carny psychics do it all the time, and it's called a cold reading. You give somebody a close once-over and make a few deductions based on the details you observe. Then you start weaving a story out of your deductions, watching your subject's reactions to see where you're accurate and tailoring your story to fit as you go on. All she had to work with, right now, was the mention that Lewis had known Valentino. Lewis has *Easy Mark* written all over him, but I guessed she was up here after bigger fish.

"Tcho-Tcho sees a man—a slender, dark man—" Mrs. Bryce went on, rolling her eyes back in her head in a sort of alarming way. "He wears Eastern raiment—"

Marion downed her cocktail in one gulp. "Hey, look, Mrs. Bryce, there's Greta Garbo," she said. "I'll just bet she's a big fan of your books."

Mrs. Bryce's eyes snapped back into place and she looked around.

"Garbo?" she cried. She made straight for the Frozen Flame, dropping Lewis like a rock, though Tcho-Tcho snapped and strained over her shoulder at him. Garbo saw them coming and sank further into the depths of her chair. I was right. Mrs. Bryce was after bigger fish.

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I didn't notice what happened after that, though, because I heard a clash of brass gates and gears engaging somewhere upstairs. The biggest fish of all was descending in his elevator, making his delayed entrance.

I edged over toward the secret panel. My mouth was dry, my palms were sweaty. I wonder if Mephistopheles ever gets sweaty palms when he's facing a prospective client?

Bump. Here he was. The panel made no sound as it opened. Not a mortal soul noticed as W.R. Hearst stepped into the room, and for that matter Lewis didn't notice either, having resumed the Charleston with Connie Talmadge. So there was only me to stare at the very, very big old man who sat down quietly in the corner.

I swear I felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck, and I didn't know why. William Randolph Hearst had had his seventieth birthday a couple of weeks before. His hair was white, he sagged where an old man sags, but his bones hadn't given in to gravity. His posture was upright and powerfully alert.

He just sat there in the shadows, watching the bright people in his big room. I watched him. This was the guy who'd fathered modern journalism, who with terrifying energy and audacity had built a financial empire that included newspapers, magazines, movies, radio, mining, ranching. He picked and chose presidents as though they were his personal appointees. He'd ruthlessly forced the world to take him on his own terms; morality was what *he* said it was; and yet there wasn't any fire that you could spot in the seated man, no restless genius apparent to the eye.

You know what he reminded me of? The Goon in the *Popeye* comic strips. Big as a mountain and scary too, but at the same time sad, with those weird deep eyes above the long straight nose.

He reminded me of something else, too, but not anything I wanted to remember right now.

"Oh, you did your trick again," said Marion, pretending to notice him at last. "Here he is, everybody. He likes to pop in like he was Houdini or something. Come on, W.R., say hello to the nice people." She pulled him to his feet and he smiled for her. His smile was even scarier than the rest of him. It was wide, and sharp, and hungry, and young.

"Hello, everybody," he said, in that unearthly voice Ambrose Bierce had described as the fragrance of violets made audible. Flutelike and without resonance. Not a human voice; jeez, I sound more human than that. But then, I'm supposed to.

And you should have seen them, all those people, turn and stare and smile and bow—just slightly, and I don't think any of them realized they were bowing to him, but I've been a courtier and I know a grovel when I see one. Marion was the only mortal in that room who wasn't afraid of him. Even Garbo had gotten up out of her chair.

Marion brought them up to him, one by one, the big names and the nobodies, and introduced the ones he didn't know. He shook hands like a shy kid. Hell, he *was* shy! That was it, I realized: he was uneasy around people, and Marion—in addition to her other duties—was his social interface. Okay, this might be something I could use.

I stood apart from the crowd, waiting unobtrusively until Marion had

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brought up everybody else. Only when she looked around for me did I step out of the shadows into her line of sight.

"And—oh, Joe, almost forgot you! Pops, this is Joe Denham. He works for Mr. Mayer? He's the nice guy who—"

Pandemonium erupted behind us. One of the damn chihuahuas had gotten loose and was after somebody with intent to kill, Lewis from the sound of it. Marion turned and ran off to deal with the commotion. I leaned forward and shook Hearst's hand as he peered over my shoulder after Marion, frowning.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hearst," I told him quietly. "Mr. Shaw asked me to visit you. I look forward to our conversation later."

Boy, did that get his attention. Those remote eyes snapped into close focus on me, and it was like being hit by a granite block. I swallowed hard but concentrated on the part I was playing, smiling mysteriously as I disengaged my hand from his and stepped back into the shadows.

He wasn't able to say anything right then, because Tcho-Tcho was herding Lewis in our direction and Lewis was dancing away from her with apologetic little yelps, jumping over the furniture, and Marion was laughing hysterically as she tried to catch the rotten dog. Mrs. Bryce just looked on with a rapt and knowing expression.

Hearst pursed his lips at the scene, but he couldn't be distracted long. He turned slowly to stare at me and nodded, just once, to show he understood.

A butler appeared in the doorway to announce that dinner was served. Hearst led us from the room, and we followed obediently.

The dining hall was less homey than the first room we'd been in. Freezing cold in spite of the roaring fire in the French Gothic hearth, its gloom was brightened a little by the silk Renaissance racing banners hanging up high and a lot of massive silver candlesticks. The walls were paneled with fifteenth-century choir stalls from Spain. I might have dozed off in any one of them, back in my days as a friar. Maybe I had; they looked familiar.

We were seated at the long refectory table. Hearst and Marion sat across from each other in the center, and guests were placed by status. The nearer you were to the master and his mistress, the higher in favor or more important you were. Guests Mr. Hearst found boring or rude were moved discreetly further out down the table.

Well, we've nowhere to go but up, Lewis transmitted, finding our place cards clear down at the end. I could see Hearst staring at me as we took our plates (plain old Blue Willow that his mother had used for camping trips) and headed for the buffet.

I bet we move up soon, too, I replied.

Ah! Have you made contact? Lewis peered around Gable's back at a nice-looking dish of venison steaks.

Just baited the hook. I tried not to glance at Hearst, who had loaded his plate with pressed duck and was pacing slowly back to the table.

Does this have to be terribly complicated? Lewis inquired, sidling in past Garbo to help himself to asparagus soufflé. *All we want is permission to conceal the script in that particular Spanish cabinet.*

Actually we want a little more than that, Lewis. I considered all the rich stuff and decided to keep things bland. Potatoes, right.

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I see. This is one of those need-to-know things, isn't it?

You got it, kiddo. I put enough food on my plate to be polite and turned to go back to my seat. Hearst caught my eye. He tracked me like a lighthouse beam all the way down the table. I nodded back, like the friendly guy I really am, and sat down across from Lewis.

I take it there's more going on here than the Company has seen fit to tell me? Lewis transmitted, unfolding his paper napkin and holding out his wine glass expectantly. The waiter filled it and moved on.

Don't be sore, I transmitted back. *You know the Company. There's probably more going on here than even I know about, okay?* I only said it to make him feel better. If I'd had any idea how right I was. . . .

So we ate dinner, at that baronial banqueting table, with the mortals. Gable carried on manful conversation with Mr. Hearst about ranching, Marion and Connie joked and giggled across the table with the male guests, young Hearst and his girl whispered to each other, and a servant had to take Tcho-Tcho and Conqueror Worm outside because they wouldn't stop snarling at a meek little dachshund that appeared under Mr. Hearst's chair. Mrs. Bryce didn't mind; she was busy trying to tell Garbo about a past life, but I couldn't figure out if it was supposed to be hers or Garbo's. Hearst's executives just ate, in silence, down at their end of the table. Lewis and I ate in silence down at our end.

Not that we were ignored. Every so often Marion would yell a pleasantry our way, and Hearst kept swinging that cold blue searchlight on me, with an expression I was damned if I could fathom.

When dinner was over, Mr. Hearst rose and picked up the dachshund. He led us all deeper into his house, to his private movie theater.

Do I have to tell you it was on a scale with everything else? Walls lined in red damask, gorgeous beamed ceiling held up by rows of gilded caryatids slightly larger than lifesize. We filed into our seats, I guess unconsciously preserving the order of the dinner table because Lewis and I wound up off on an edge again. Hearst settled into his big leather chair with its telephone, called the projectionist and gave an order. The lights went out, and after a fairly long moment in darkness, the screen lit up. It was *Going Hollywood,* Marion's latest film with Bing Crosby. She greeted her name on the screen with a long loud raspberry, and everyone tittered.

Except me. I wasn't tittering, no sir; Mr. Hearst wasn't in his big leather chair anymore. He was padding toward me slowly in the darkness, carrying his little dog, and if I hadn't been able to see by infrared I'd probably have screamed and jumped right through that expensive ceiling when his big hand dropped on my shoulder in the darkness.

He leaned down close to my ear.

"Mr. Denham? I'd like to speak with you in private, if I may," he told me.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Hearst," I gasped, and got to my feet. Beside me, Lewis glanced over. His eyes widened.

Break a leg, he transmitted, and turned his attention to the screen again.

I edged out of the row and followed Hearst, who was walking away without the slightest doubt I was obeying him. Once we were outside the theater, all he said was, "Let's go this way. It'll be faster."

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"Okay," I said, as though I had any idea where we were going. We walked back through the house. There wasn't a sound except our footsteps, echoing off those high walls. We emerged into the assembly hall, eerily lit up, and Hearst led me to the panel that concealed his elevator. It opened for him. We got in, he and I and the little dog, and ascended through his house.

My mouth was dry, my palms were sweating, my dinner wasn't sitting too good . . . well, that last one's a lie. I'm a cyborg and I can't get indigestion. But I felt like a mortal with a nervous stomach, know what I mean? And I'd have given half the Renaissance masterpieces in that house for a roll of Pep-O-Mints right then. The dachshund watched me sympathetically.

We got out at the third floor and stepped into Hearst's private study. This was the room from which he ran his empire when he was at La Cuesta Encantada, this was where phones connected him directly to newsrooms all over the country; this was where he glanced at teletype before giving orders to the movers and shakers. Up in a corner, a tiny concealed motion picture camera began to whir the moment we stepped on the carpet, and I could hear the click as a modified Dictaphone hidden in a cabinet began to record. State-of-the-art surveillance, for 1933.

It was a nicer room than the others I'd been in so far. Huge, of course, with an antique Spanish ceiling and golden hanging lamps, but wood-paneled walls and books and Bakhtiari carpets gave it a certain warmth. My gaze followed the glow of lamplight down the long polished mahogany conference table and skidded smack into Hearst's life-size portrait on the far wall. It was a good portrait, done when he was in his thirties, the young emperor staring out with those somber eyes. He looked innocent. He looked dangerous.

"Nice likeness," I said.

"The painter had a great talent," Hearst replied. "He was a dear friend of mine. Died too soon. Why do you suppose that happens?"

"People dying too soon?" I stammered slightly as I said it, and mentally yelled at myself to calm down: it was just business with a mortal, now, and the guy was even handing me an opening. I gave him my best enigmatic smile and shook my head sadly. "It's the fate of mortals to die, Mr. Hearst. Even those with extraordinary ability and talent. Rather a pity, wouldn't you agree?"

"Oh, yes," Hearst replied, never taking his eyes off me a moment. "And I guess that's what we're going to discuss now, isn't it, Mr. Denham? Let's sit down."

He gestured me to a seat, not at the big table but in one of the comfy armchairs. He settled into another to face me, as though we were old friends having a chat. The little dog curled up in his lap and sighed. God, that was a quiet room.

"So George Bernard Shaw sent you," Hearst stated.

"Not exactly," I said, folding my hands. "He mentioned you might be interested in what my people have to offer."

Hearst just looked at me. I coughed slightly and went on: "He spoke well of you, as much as Mr. Shaw ever speaks well of anybody. And, from

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what I've seen, you have a lot in common with the founders of our Company. You appreciate the magnificent art humanity is capable of creating. You hate to see it destroyed or wasted by blind chance. You've spent a lot of your life preserving rare and beautiful things from destruction.

"And—just as necessary—you're a man with vision. Modern science, and its potential, doesn't frighten you. You're not superstitious. You're a moral man, but you won't let narrow-minded moralists dictate to you! So you're no coward, either."

He didn't seem pleased or flattered, he was just listening to me. What was he thinking? I pushed on, doing my best to play the scene like Claude Rains.

"You see, we've been watching you carefully for quite a while now, Mr. Hearst," I told him. "We don't make this offer lightly, or to ordinary mortals. But there are certain questions we feel obliged to ask first."

Hearst just nodded. When was he going to say something?

"It's not for everybody," I continued, "what we're offering. You may think you want it very much, but you need to look honestly into your heart and ask yourself: are you ever tired of life? Are there ever times when you'd welcome a chance to sleep forever?"

"No," Hearst replied. "If I were tired of life, I'd give up and die. I'm not after peace and tranquility, Mr. Denham. I want more time to live. I have things to do! The minute I slow down and decide to watch the clouds roll by, I'll be bored to death."

"Maybe." I nodded. "But here's another thing to consider: how much the world has changed since you were a young man. Look at that portrait. When it was painted, you were in the prime of your life—*and so was your generation.* It was your world. You knew the rules of the game, and everything made sense.

"But you were born before Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg address, Mr. Hearst. You're not living in that world any more. All the rules have changed. The music is so brassy and strident, the dances so crude. The kings are all dying out, and petty dictators with dirty hands are seizing power. Aren't you, even a little, bewildered by the sheer speed with which everything moves nowadays? You're only seventy, but don't you feel just a bit like a dinosaur sometimes, a survivor of a forgotten age?"

"No," said Hearst firmly. "I like the present. I like the speed and the newness of things. I have a feeling I'd enjoy the future even more. Besides, if you study history, you have to conclude that humanity has steadily improved over the centuries, whatever the cynics say. The future generations are bound to be better than we are, no matter how outlandish their fashions may seem now. And what's fashion, anyway? What do I care what music the young people listen to? They'll be healthier, and smarter, and they'll have the benefit of learning from our mistakes. I'd love to hear what they'll have to say for themselves!"

I nodded again, let a beat pass in silence for effect before I answered. At last:

"There are also," I warned him, "matters of the heart to be considered. When a man has loved ones, certain things are going to cause him grief—if he lives long enough to see them happen. Think about that, Mr. Hearst."

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He nodded slowly, and at last he dropped his eyes from mine.

"It would be worse for a man who felt family connections deeply," he said. "And every man ought to. But things aren't always the way they ought to be, Mr. Denham. I don't know why that is. I wish I did."

Did he mean he wished he knew why he'd never felt much paternal connection to his sons? I just looked understanding.

"And as for love," he went on, and paused. "Well, there are certain things to which you have to be resigned. It's inevitable. Nobody loves without pain."

Was he wondering again why Marion wouldn't stop drinking for him?

"And love doesn't always last, and that hurts," I condoled. Hearst lifted his eyes to me again.

"When it does last, that hurts too," he informed me. "I assure you I can bear pain."

Well, those were all the right answers. I found myself reaching up in an attempt to stroke the beard I used to wear.

"A sound, positive attitude, Mr. Hearst," I told him. "Good for you. I think we've come to the bargaining table now."

"How much can you let me have?" he said instantly.

Well, this wasn't going to take long. "Twenty years," I replied. "Give or take a year or two."

Yikes! What an expression of rapacity in his eyes. Had I forgotten I was dealing with William Randolph Hearst?

"Twenty years?" he scoffed. "When I'm only seventy? I had a grandfather who lived to be ninety-seven. I might get that far on my own."

"Not with that heart, and you know it," I countered.

His mouth tightened in acknowledgment. "All right. If your people can't do any better—twenty years might be acceptable. And in return, Mr. Denham?"

"Two things, Mr. Hearst," I held up my hand with two fingers extended. "The Company would like the freedom to store certain things here at La Cuesta Encantada from time to time. Nothing dangerous or contraband, of course! Nothing but certain books, certain paintings, some other little rarities that wouldn't survive the coming centuries if they were kept in a less fortified place. In a way, we'd just be adding items to your collection."

"You must have an idea that this house will 'survive the coming centuries,' then," said Hearst, looking grimly pleased.

"Oh, yes, sir." I told him. "It will. This is one thing you've loved that won't fade away."

He rose from his chair at that, setting the dog down carefully, and paced away from me down the long room. Then he turned and walked back, tucking a grin out of sight. "Okay, Mr. Denham," he said. "Your second request must be pretty hard to swallow. What's the other thing your people want?"

"Certain conditions set up in your will, Mr. Hearst," I said. "A secret trust giving my Company control of certain of your assets. Only a couple, but very specific ones."

He bared his smile at me. It roused all kinds of atavistic terrors; I felt sweat break out on my forehead, get clammy in my armpits.

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"My, my. What kind of dumb cluck do your people think I am?" he inquired jovially.

"Well, you'd certainly be one if you jumped at their offer without wanting to know more," I smiled back, resisting the urge to run like hell. "They don't want your money, Mr. Hearst. Leave all you want to your wife and your boys. Leave Marion more than enough to protect her. What my Company wants won't create any hardship for your heirs, in any way. But—you're smart enough to understand this—there are plans being made now that won't bear fruit for another couple of centuries. Something you might not value much, tonight in 1933, might be a winning card in a game being played in the future. You see what I'm saying here?"

"I might," said Hearst, hitching up the knees of his trousers and sitting down again. The little dog jumped back into his lap. Relieved that he was no longer looming over me, I pushed on:

"Obviously we'd submit a draft of the conditions for your approval, though your lawyers couldn't be allowed to examine it—"

"And I can see why." Hearst held up his big hand. "And that's all right. I think I'm still competent to look over a contract. But, Mr. Denham! You've just told me I've got something you're going to need very badly one day. Now, wouldn't you expect me to raise the price? And I'd have to have more information about your people. I'd have to see proof that any of your story, or Mr. Shaw's for that matter, is true."

What had I said to myself, that this wasn't going to take long?

"Sure," I said brightly. "I brought all the proof I'll need."

"That's good," Hearst told me, and picked up the receiver of the phone on the table at his elbow. "Anne? Send us up some coffee, please. Yes, thank you." He leaned away from the receiver a moment to ask: "Do you take cream or sugar, Mr. Denham?"

"Both," I said.

"Cream and sugar, please," he said into the phone. "And please put Jerome on the line." He waited briefly. "Jerome? I want the black suitcase that's under Mr. Denham's bed. Yes. Thank you." He hung up and met my stare of astonishment. "That is where you've got it, isn't it? Whatever proof you've brought me?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact," I replied.

"Good," he said, and leaned back in his chair. The little dog insinuated her head under his hand, begging for attention. He looked down at her in mild amusement and began to scratch between her ears. I leaned back too, noting that my shirt was plastered to my back with sweat and only grateful it wasn't running down my face.

"Are you a mortal creature, Mr. Denham?" Hearst inquired softly.

Now the sweat was running down my face.

"Uh, no, sir," I said. "Though I started out as one."

"You did, eh?" he remarked. "How old are you?"

"About twenty thousand years," I answered. Wham, he hit me with that deadweight stare again.

"Really?" he said. "A little fellow like you?"

I ask you, is 5'5" really so short? "We were smaller back then," I explained. "People were, I mean. Diet, probably."

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He just nodded. After a moment he asked: "You've lived through the ages as an eyewitness to history?"

"Yeah. Yes, sir."

"You saw the Pyramids built?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact." I prayed he wouldn't ask me how they did it, because he'd never believe the truth, but he pushed on:

"You saw the Trojan War?"

"Well, yes, I did, but it wasn't exactly like Homer said."

"The stories in the Bible, are they true? Did they really happen? Did you meet Jesus Christ?" His eyes were blazing at me.

"Well—" I waved my hands in a helpless kind of way. "I didn't meet Jesus, no, because I was working in Rome back then. I never worked in Judea until the Crusades, and that was way later. And as for the stuff in the Bible being true . . . some of it is, and some of it isn't, and anyway it depends on what you mean by true." I gave in and pulled out a handkerchief, mopping my face.

"But the theological questions!" Hearst leaned forward. "Have we got souls that survive us after physical death? What about Heaven and Hell?"

"Sorry." I shook my head. "How should I know? I've never been to either place. I've never died, remember?"

"Don't your masters know?"

"If they do, they haven't told me," I apologized. "But then there's a lot they haven't told me."

Hearst's mouth tightened again, and yet I got the impression he was satisfied in some way. I sagged backward, feeling like a wrung-out sponge. So much for my suave subtle Mephistopheles act.

On the other hand, Hearst liked being in control of the game. He might be more receptive this way.

Our coffee arrived. Hearst took half a cup and filled it the rest of the way up with cream. I put cream and four lumps of sugar in mine.

"You like sugar," Hearst observed, sipping his coffee. "But then, I don't suppose you had much opportunity to get sweets for the first few thousand years of your life?"

"Nope," I admitted. I tasted my cup and set it aside to cool. "No Neolithic candy stores."

There was a discreet double knock. Jerome entered after a word from Mr. Hearst. He brought in my suitcase and set it down between us.

"Thanks," I said.

"You're welcome, sir," he replied, without a trace of sarcasm, and exited as quietly as he'd entered. It was just me, Hearst and the dog again. They looked at me expectantly.

"All right," I said, drawing a deep breath. I leaned down, punched in the code on the lock, and opened the suitcase. I felt like a traveling salesman. I guess I sort of was one.

"Here we are," I told Hearst, drawing out a silver bottle. "This is your free sample. Drink it, and you'll taste what it feels like to be forty again. The effects will only last a day or so, but that ought to be enough to show you that we can give you those twenty years with no difficulties."

"So your secret's a potion?" Hearst drank more of his coffee.

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"Not entirely," I said truthfully. I was going to have to do some cryptosurgery to make temporary repairs on his heart, but we never tell them about that part of it. "Now. Here's something I think you'll find a lot more impressive."

I took out the viewscreen and set it up on the table between us. "If this were, oh, a thousand years ago and you were some emperor I was trying to impress, I'd tell you this was a magic mirror. As it is . . . you know that television idea they're working on in England, right now?"

"Yes," Hearst replied.

"This is where that invention's going to have led in about two hundred years," I said. "Now, I can't pick up any broadcasts because there aren't any yet, but this one also plays recorded programs." I slipped a small gold disc from a black envelope and pushed it into a slot in the front of the device, and hit the PLAY button.

Instantly the screen lit up pale blue. A moment later a montage of images appeared there, with music booming from the tiny speakers: a staccato fanfare announcing the evening news for April 18, 2106.

Hearst peered into the viewscreen in astonishment. He leaned close as the little stories sped by, the attractive people chattering brightly: New mining colonies on Luna, Ulster Revenge League terrorists bombing London again, new international agreement signed to tighten prohibitions on Recombinant DNA research, protesters in Mexico picketing Japanese-owned auto plants—

"Wait," Hearst said, lifting his big hand. "How do you stop this thing? Can you slow it down?"

I made it pause. The image of Mexican union workers torching a sushi bar froze. Hearst remained staring at the screen.

"Is that," he said, "what journalism is like, in the future?"

"Well, yes, sir. No newspapers any more, you see; it'll all be online by then. Sort of a print-and-movie broadcast," I explained, though I was aware the revelation would probably give the poor old guy future shock. This had been his field of expertise, after all.

"But, I mean—" Hearst tore his gaze away and looked at me probingly. "This is only snippets of stuff. There's no real coverage; maybe three sentences to a story and one picture. It hasn't got half the substance of a newsreel!"

Not a word of surprise about colonies on the Moon.

"No, it'll be pretty lightweight," I admitted. "But, you see, Mr. Hearst, that'll be what the average person wants out of News by the twenty-second century. Something brief and easy to grasp. Most people will be too busy—and too uninterested—to follow stories in depth."

"Play it over again, please," Hearst ordered, and I restarted it for him. He watched intently. I felt a twinge of pity. What could he possibly make of the sound bites, the chaotic juxtaposition of images, the rapid, bouncing and relentless pace? He watched, with the same frown, to about the same spot; then gestured for me to stop it again. I obeyed.

"Exactly," he said. "Exactly. News for the fellow in the street! Even an illiterate stevedore could get this stuff. It's like a kindergarten primer." He looked at me sidelong. "And it occurs to me, Mr. Denham, that it must

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be fairly easy to sway public opinion with this kind of pap. A picture's worth a thousand words, isn't it? I always thought so. This is mostly pictures. If you fed the public the right little fragments of story, you could manipulate their impressions of what's going on. Couldn't you?"

I gaped at him.

"Uh—you could, but of course that wouldn't be a very ethical thing to do," I found myself saying.

"No, if you were doing it for unethical reasons," Hearst agreed. "If you were on the side of the angels, though, I can't see how it would be wrong to pull out every trick of rhetoric available to fight for your cause! Let's see the rest of this. You're looking at these control buttons, aren't you? What are these things, these hieroglyphics?"

"Universal icons," I explained. "They're activated by eye movement. To start it again, you look at this one—" Even as I was pointing, he'd started it again himself.

There wasn't much left on the disc. A tiny clutch of factoids about a new fusion power plant, a weather report, a sports piece, and then two bitty scoops of local news. The first was a snap and ten seconds of sound, from a reporter at the scene of a party in San Francisco commemorating the two-hundredth anniversary of the 1906 earthquake. The second one—the story that had influenced the Company's choice of this particular news broadcast for Mr. Hearst's persuasion—was a piece on protesters blocking the subdivision of Hearst Ranch, which was in danger of being turned into a planned community with tract housing, golf courses and shopping malls.

Hearst caught his breath at that, and if I thought his face had been scary before I saw now I had had no idea what scary could be. His glare hit the activation buttons with almost physical force: replay, replay, replay. After he'd watched that segment half a dozen times, he shut it off and looked at me.

"They can't do it," he said. "Did you see those plans? They'd ruin this coastline. They'd cut down all the trees! Traffic and noise and soot and—and where would all the animals go? Animals have rights too."

"I'm afraid most of the wildlife would be extinct in this range by then, Mr. Hearst," I apologized, placing the viewer back into its case. "But maybe now you've got an idea about why my Company needs to control certain of your assets."

He was silent, breathing hard. The little dog was looking up at him with anxious eyes.

"All right, Mr. Denham," he said quietly. "To paraphrase Dickens: Is this the image of what will be, or only of what may be?"

I shrugged. "I only know what's going to happen in the future in a general kind of way, Mr. Hearst. Big stuff, like wars and inventions. I'm not told a lot else. I sincerely hope things don't turn out so badly for your ranch—and if it's any consolation, you notice the program was about protesting the *proposed* development only. The problem is, history can't be changed, not once it's happened."

"History, or recorded history, Mr. Denham?" Hearst countered. "They're not at all necessarily the same thing, I can tell you from personal experience."

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"I'll bet you can," I answered, wiping away sweat again. "Okay, you've figured something out: there are all kinds of little zones of error in recorded history. My Company makes use of those errors. If history can't be changed, it can be worked around. See?"

"Perfectly," Hearst replied. He leaned back in his chair and his voice was hard, those violets of sound transmuted to porphyry marble. "I'm convinced your people are on the level, Mr. Denham. Now. You go and tell them that twenty years is pretty much chickenfeed as far as I'm concerned. It won't do, not by a long way. I want nothing less than the same immortality you've got, you see? Permanent life. I always thought I could put it to good use and, now that you've shown me the future, I can see my work's cut out for me. I also want shares in your Company's stock. I want to be a player in this game."

"But—" I sat bolt upright in my chair. "Mr. Hearst! I can manage the shares of stock. But the immortality's impossible! You don't understand how it works. The immortality process can't be done on old men. We have to start with young mortals. I was only a little kid when I was recruited for the Company. Don't you see? Your body's too old and damaged to be kept running indefinitely."

"Who said I wanted immortality in this body?" said Hearst. "Why would I want to drive around forever in a rusted old Model T when I could have one of those shiny new modern cars? Your masters seem to be capable of darned near anything. I'm betting that there's a way to bring me back in a new body, and if there isn't a way now, I'll bet they can come up with one if they try. They're going to have to try, if they want my co-operation. Tell them that."

I opened my mouth to protest, and then I thought—Why argue? Promise him anything. "Okay," I agreed.

"Good," Hearst said, finishing his coffee. "Do you need a telephone to contact them? My switchboard can connect you anywhere in the world in a couple of minutes."

"Thanks, but we use something different," I told him. "It's back in my room and I don't think Jerome could find it. I'll try to have an answer for you by tomorrow morning, though."

He nodded. Reaching out his hand, he took up the silver bottle and considered it. "Is this the drug that made you what you are?" He looked at me. His dog looked up at him.

"Pretty much. Except my body's been altered to manufacture the stuff, so it pumps through me all the time," I explained. "I don't have to take it orally."

"But you'd have no objection to sampling a little, before I drank it?"

"Absolutely none," I said, and held out my empty coffee cup. Hearst lifted his eyebrows at that. He puzzled a moment over the bottlecap before figuring it out, and then poured about three ounces of Pineal Tribrantine Three cocktail into my cup. I drank it down, trying not to make a face.

It wasn't all PT3. There was some kind of fruit base, cranberry juice as far as I could tell, and a bunch of hormones and euphoriacs to make him feel great as well as healthy, and something to stimulate the production of telomerase. Beneficial definitely, but not an immortality potion by a

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long shot. He'd have to have custom-designed biomechanicals and prosthetic implants, to say nothing of years of training for eternity starting when he was about three. But why tell the guy?

And Hearst was looking young already, just watching me: wonderstruck, scared and eager. When I didn't curl up and die, he poured the rest of the bottle's contents into his cup and drank it down, glancing furtively at his hidden camera.

"My," he said. "That tasted funny."

I nodded.

And of course he didn't die either, as the time passed in that grand room. He quizzed me about my personal life, wanted to hear about what it was like to live in the ancient world, and how many famous people I'd met. I told him all about Phoenician traders and Egyptian priests and Roman senators I'd known. After a while Hearst noticed he felt swell—I could tell by his expression—and he got up and put down the little dog and began to pace the room as we talked, not with the heavy cautious tread of the old man he was but with a light step, almost dancing.

"So I said to Apuleius, 'But that only leaves three fish, and anyway what do you want to do about the flute player—' " I was saying, when a door in the far corner opened and Marion stormed in.

"W-w-where *were* you?" she shouted. Marion stammered when she was tired or upset, and she was both now. "Thanks a lot for s-sneaking out like that and leaving me to t-t-talk to everybody. They're your guests too, y-you know!"

Hearst turned to stare at her, openmouthed. I really think he'd forgotten about Marion. I jumped up, looking apologetic.

"Whoops! Hey, Marion, it was my fault. I needed to ask his advice about something," I explained. She turned, surprised to see me.

"Joe?" she said.

"I'm sorry to take so long, dear," said Hearst, coming and putting his arms around her. "Your friend's a very interesting fellow." He was looking at her like a wolf looks at a lamb chop. "Did they like the picture?"

"N-n-no!" she said. "Half of 'em left before it was over. You'd think they'd s-stay to watch Bing C-Crosby."

If there's one thing I've learned over the millennia, it's when to exit a room.

"Thanks for the talk, Mr. Hearst," I said, grabbing my black case and heading for the elevator. "I'll see if I can't find that prospectus. Maybe you can look at it for me tomorrow,"

"Maybe," Hearst murmured into Marion's neck. I was ready to crawl down the elevator cable like a monkey to get out of there, but fortunately the car was still on that floor, so I jumped in and rattled down through the house like Mephistopheles dropping through a trap door instead.

It was dark when I emerged into the assembly hall, but as soon as the panel had closed after me light blazed up from the overhead fixtures. I blinked, looking around. Scanning revealed a camera mount, way up high, that I hadn't noticed before. I saluted it Roman style and hurried out into the night, over the Pompeiian floor. As soon as I had crossed the

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threshold, the lights blinked out behind me. More surveillance. How many faithful Jeromes did Hearst have, sitting patiently behind peepholes in tiny rooms?

The night air was chilly, fresh with the smell of orange and lemon blossoms. The stars looked close enough to fall on me. I wandered around between the statues for a while, wondering how the hell I was going to fool the master of this house into thinking the Company had agreed to his terms. Gee: for that matter, how was I going to break it to the Company that they'd underestimated William Randolph Hearst?

Well, it wasn't going to be the first time I'd had to be the bearer of bad news to Dr. Zeus. At last I gave it up and found my way back to my wing of the guest house.

There was a light on in the gorgeously gilded sitting room. Lewis was perched uncomfortably on the edge of a sixteenth-century chair. He looked guilty about something. Jumping to his feet as I came in, he said:

"Joseph, we have a problem."

"We do, huh?" I looked him over wearily. All in the world I wanted right then was a hot shower and a few hours of shuteye. "What is it?"

"The, ah, Valentino script has been stolen," he said.

My priorities changed. I strode muttering to the phone and picked it up. After a moment a blurred voice answered.

"Jerome? How you doing, pal? Listen, I'd like some room service. Can I get a hot fudge sundae over here at La Casa Del Sol? Heavy on the hot fudge?"

"Make that two," Lewis suggested. I looked daggers at him and went on:

"Make that two. No, no nuts. And if you've got any chocolate pudding or chocolate cake or some Hershey bars or anything, send those along too. Okay? I'll make it worth your while, chum."

". . . so I just thought I'd have a last look at it before I went to bed, but when I opened the case it wasn't there," Lewis explained, licking his spoon.

"You scanned for thermoluminescence? Fingerprints?" I said, putting the sundae dish down with one hand and reaching for cake with the other.

"Of course I did. No fingerprints, and judging from the faintness of the thermoluminescence, whoever went through my things must have been wearing gloves," Lewis told me. "About all I could tell was that a mortal had been in my room, probably an hour to an hour and a half before I got there. Do you think it was one of the servants?"

"No, I don't. I know Mr. Hearst sent Jerome in here to get something out of my room, but I don't think the guy ducked into yours as an afterthought to go through your drawers. Anybody who swiped stuff from Mr. Hearst's guests wouldn't work here very long," I said. "If any guest had ever had something stolen, everybody in the Industry would know about it. Gossip travels fast in this town." I meant Hollywood, of course, not San Simeon.

"There's a first time for everything," Lewis said miserably.

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"True. But I think our buddy Jerome has *faithful retainer* written all over him," I said, finishing the cake in about three bites.

"Then who else could have done it?" Lewis wondered, starting on a dish of pudding.

"Well, you're the Literary Specialist. Haven't you ever accessed any Agatha Christie novels?" I tossed the cake plate aside and pounced on a Hershey bar. "You know what we do next. Process of elimination. Who was where and when? I'll tell you this much, it wasn't me and it wasn't Big Daddy Hearst. I was with him from the moment we left the rest of you in the theater until Marion came up and I had to scram." I closed my eyes and sighed in bliss, as the Theobromos high finally kicked in.

"Well—" Lewis looked around distractedly, trying to think. "Then—it has to have been one of us who were in the theater watching *Going Hollywood*."

"Yeah. And Marion said about half the audience walked out before it was over," I said. "Did you walk out, Lewis?"

"No! I stayed until the end. I can't imagine why anybody left. I thought it was delightful," Lewis told me earnestly. "It had Bing Crosby in it, you know."

"You've got pudding on your chin. Okay; so you stayed through the movie." I said, realizing my wits weren't at their sharpest right now but determined to thrash this through. "And so did Marion. Who else was there when the house lights came up, Lewis?"

Lewis sucked in his lower lip, thinking hard through the theobromine fog. "I'm replaying my visual transcript," he informed me. "Clark Gable is there. The younger Mr. Hearst and his friend are there. The unpleasant-looking fellows in the business suits are there. Connie's there."

"Garbo?"

"Mm—nope."

"The two silents guys? Charlie and Laurence?"

"No."

"What's his name, Jack from Paramount, is he there?"

"No, he isn't."

"What about the crazy lady with the dogs?"

"She's not there either." Lewis raised horrified eyes to me. "My gosh, it could have been any one of them." He remembered the pudding and dabbed at it with his handkerchief.

"Or the thief might have sneaked out, robbed your room and sneaked back in before the end of the picture," I told him.

"Oh, why complicate things?" he moaned. "What are we going to do?"

"Damned if I know tonight," I replied, struggling to my feet. "Tomorrow you're going to find out who took the Valentino script and get it back. I have other problems, okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Hearst is upping the ante on the game. He's given me an ultimatum for Dr. Zeus," I explained.

"Wowie." Lewis looked appalled. "He thinks he can dictate terms to the Company?"

"He's doing it, isn't he?" I said, trudging off to my bedroom. "And guess

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who gets to deliver the messages both ways. Now you see why I was nervous? I knew this was going to happen."

"Well, cheer up," Lewis called after me. "Things can't go more wrong than this."

I switched on the light in my room, and found out just how much more wrong they could go.

Something exploded up from the bed at my face, a confusion of needle teeth and blaring sound. I was stoned, I was tired, I was confused, and so I just slapped it away as hard as I could, which with me being a cyborg and all was pretty hard. The thing flew across the room and hit the wall with a crunch. Then it dropped to the floor and didn't move, except for its legs kicking, but not much or for long.

Lewis was beside me immediately, staring. He put his handkerchief to his mouth and turned away, ashen-faced.

"Ye gods!" he said. "You've killed Tcho-Tcho!"

"Maybe I just stunned her?" I staggered over to see. Lewis staggered with me. We stood looking down at Tcho-Tcho.

"Nope," Lewis told me sadly, shaking his head.

"The Devil, and the Devil's Dam, and the Devil's . . . insurance agent," I swore, groping backward until I found a chair to collapse in. "Now what do we do?" I averted my eyes from the nasty little corpse and my gaze fell on the several shreddy parts that were all that remained of my left tennis shoe. "Hey! Look what the damn thing did to my sneaker!"

"How did she get in here, anyway?" Lewis wrung his hands.

"So much for my playing tennis with anybody tomorrow," I snarled.

"But—but if she was in here long enough to chew up your shoe . . . " Lewis paused, eyes glazing over in difficult thought. "Oh, I wish I hadn't done that Theobromos. Isn't that the way it always is? Just when you think it's safe to relax and unwind a little—"

"Hey! This means Cartimandua Bryce took your Valentino script," I said, leaping to my feet and grabbing hold of the chair to steady myself. "See? The damn dog must have followed her in unbeknownst!"

"You're right." Lewis' eyes widened. "Except—well, no, not necessarily. She didn't have the dogs with her, don't you remember? They wouldn't behave at table. They had to be taken back to her room."

"So they did." I subsided into the chair once more. "Hell. If somebody was sneaking through the rooms, the dog might have got out and wandered around until it got in here, chewed up my shoe and went to sleep on my bed."

"And that means—that means—" Lewis shook his head. "I'm too tired to think what that means. What are we going to do about the poor dog? I suppose we'll have to go tell Mrs. Bryce."

"Nothing doing," I snapped. "When I'm in the middle of a deal with Hearst? Hearst, who's fanatic about kindness to animals? Sorry about that, W.R., but I just brutally murdered a dear little chihuahua in La Casa Del Sol. Thank God there aren't any surveillance cameras in here!"

"But we have to do something," Lewis protested. "We can't leave it here on the rug! Should we take it out and bury it?"

"No. There's bound to be a search when Mrs. Bryce notices it's gone," I

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said. "If they find the grave and dig it up, they'll know the mutt didn't die naturally, or why would somebody take the trouble to hide the body?"

"Unless we hid it somewhere it'd never be found?" Lewis suggested. "We could pitch it over the perimeter fence. Then, maybe the wild animals would remove the evidence!"

"I don't think zebras are carrion eaters, Lewis." I rubbed my temples wearily. "And I don't know about you, but in the condition I'm in, I don't think I'd get it over the fence on the first throw. All I'd need then would be for one of Hearst's surveillance cameras to pick me up in a spotlight, trying to stuff a dead chihuahua through a fence. Hey!" I brightened. "Hearst has a zoo up here. What if we shotput Tcho-Tcho into the lion's den?"

Lewis shuddered. "What if we missed?"

"To hell with this." I got up. "Dogs die all the time of natural causes."

So we wound up flitting through the starry night in hyperfunction, leaving no more than a blur on any cameras that might be recording our passage, and a pitiful little corpse materialized in what we hoped was a natural attitude of canine demise on the front steps of La Casa Grande. With any luck it would be stiff as a board by morning, which would make foul play harder to detect.

Showered and somewhat sobered up, I opened the field credenza in my suitcase and crouched before it to tap out my report on its tiny keys:

WRH WILLING, HAD PT3 SAMPLE, BUT HOLDING OUT FOR MORE. TERMS: STOCK SHARES PLUS IMMORTALITY PROCESS. HAVE EXPLAINED IMPOSSIBILITY. REFUSES TO ACCEPT.

SUGGEST: LIE. DELIVER EIGHTEEN YEARS PER HISTORICAL RECORD WITH PROMISE OF MORE, THEN RENEGOTIATE TERMS WITH HEIRS.

PLEASE ADVISE.

It didn't seem useful to tell anybody that the Valentino script was missing. Why worry the Company? After all, we must be going to find it and complete at least that part of the mission successfully, because history records that an antique restorer will, on December 20, 2326, at the height of the Old Hollywood Revival, find the script in a hidden compartment in a Spanish cabinet, once owned by W.R. Hearst but recently purchased by Dr. Zeus Incorporated. Provenance indisputably proven, it will then be auctioned off for an unbelievably huge sum, even allowing for twenty-fourth century inflation. And history cannot be changed, can it?

Of course it can't.

I yawned pleasurably, preparing to shut the credenza down for the night, but it beeped to let me know a message was coming in. I scowled at it and leaned close to see what it said.

TERMS ACCEPTABLE. INFORM HEARST AND AT FIRST OPPORTUNITY PERFORM REPAIRS AND UPGRADE. QUINTILIUS WILL CONTACT WITH STOCK OPTIONS.

I read it through twice. Oh, okay; the Company must mean they intended to follow my suggestion. I'd promise him the moon but give him the eighteen years decreed by history, and he wouldn't even be getting

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those if I didn't do that repair work on his heart. What did they mean by *upgrade,* though? Eh! Details.

And I had no reason to feel lousy about lying to the old man. How many mortals even get to make it to 88, anyway? And when my stopgap measures finally failed, he'd close his eyes and die—like a lot of mortals—in happy expectation of eternal life after death. Of course, he'd get it in Heaven (if there is such a place) and not down here like he'd been promised, but he'd be in no position to sue me for breach of contract anyway.

I acknowledged the transmission and shut down at last. Yawning again, I crawled into my fabulous priceless antique Renaissance-era hand-carved gilded bed. The chihuahua hadn't peed on it. That was something, at least.

I slept in next morning, though I knew Hearst preferred his guests to rise with the sun and do something healthy like ride five miles before breakfast. I figured he'd make an exception in my case. Besides, if the PT3 cocktail had delivered its usual kick he'd probably be staying in bed late himself, and so would Marion. I squinted up at the left-hand tower of La Casa Grande, making my way through the brilliant sunlight.

No dead dog in sight anywhere, as I hauled open the big front doors; Tcho-Tcho's passing must have been discovered without much commotion. Good. I walked through the cool and the gloom of the big house to the morning room at the other end, where sunlight poured in through French doors. There a buffet was set out with breakfast.

Lewis was there ahead of me, loading up on flapjacks. I heaped hash browns on my plate and, for the benefit of the mortals in various corners of the room, said brightly:

"So, Lewis! Some swell room, huh? How'd you sleep?"

"Fine, thanks," he replied. *Other than a slight Theobromos hangover.* "But, you know, the saddest thing happened! One of Mrs. Bryce's little dogs got out in the night and died of exposure. The servants found it this morning."

"Gee, that's too bad." *Anybody suspect anything?*

No. "Yes, Mrs. Bryce is dreadfully upset." *I feel just awful.*

Hey, did you lure the damn mutt into my room? We've got worse things to worry about this morning. I helped myself to coffee and carried my plate out into the dining hall, sitting down at the long table. Lewis followed me.

Right, the Valentino script. Have you had any new ideas about who might have taken it?

No. I dug into my hash browns. *Has anybody else complained about anything missing from their rooms?*

No, nobody's said a word.

The thing is—nobody knew you had it with you, right? You didn't happen to mention that you were carrying around an autographed script for The Son of the Sheik?

No, of course not! Lewis sipped his coffee, looking slightly affronted. *I've only been in this business for nearly two millennia.*

Maybe one of the guests was after Garbo or Gable, and got into your

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room by mistake? I turned nonchalantly to glance into the morning room at Gable. He was deeply immersed in the sports section of one of Mr. Hearst's papers.

Well, if it was an obsessive Garbo fan he'd have seen pretty quickly that he wasn't in a woman's room. Lewis put both elbows on the table in a manly sort of way. *So if it was one of the ladies after Gable—? Though it still doesn't explain why she'd steal the script.*

I glanced over at Connie, who was sitting in an easy chair balancing a plate of scrambled eggs on her knees as she ate. *Connie wouldn't have done it, and neither would Marion. I doubt it was the Hearst kid's popsy. That leaves Garbo and Mrs. Bryce, who left the movie early.*

But why would Garbo steal the script? Lewis drew his eyebrows together.

Why does Garbo do anything? I shrugged. Lewis looked around uneasily.

I can't see her rifling through my belongings, however. And that leaves Mrs. Bryce.

Yeah. Mrs. Bryce. Whose little dog appeared mysteriously in my bedroom.

I got up and crossed back into the morning room on the pretext of going for a coffee refill. Mrs. Bryce, clad in black pajamas, was sitting alone in a prominent chair, with Conqueror Worm greedily wolfing down Eggs Benedict from a plate on the floor. Mrs. Bryce was not eating. Her eyes were closed and her face turned up to the ceiling. I guess she was meditating, since she was doing the whole lotus position bit.

As I passed, Conqueror Worm left off eating long enough to raise his tiny head and snarl at me.

"I hope you will excuse him, Mr. Denham," said Mrs. Bryce, without opening her eyes. "He's very protective of me just now."

"That's okay, Mrs. Bryce," I said affably, but I kept well away from the dog. "Sorry to hear about your sad loss."

"Oh, Tcho-Tcho remains with us still," she said serenely. "She has merely ascended to the next astral plane. I just received a communication from her, in fact. She discarded her earthly body in order to accomplish her more important work."

"Gee, that's just great," I replied, and Gable looked up from his paper at me and rolled his eyes. I shrugged and poured myself more coffee. I still thought Mrs. Bryce was a phony on the make, but if she wanted to pretend Tcho-Tcho had passed on voluntarily instead of being swatted like a tennis ball, that was all right with me.

You think she might have done it, after all? Lewis wondered as I came back to the table. *She had sort of fixated on me, before Marion turned her on Garbo.*

Could be. I think she's too far off on another planet to be organized enough for cat burglary, though. And why would she steal the script and nothing else?

I can't imagine. What are we going to do? Lewis twisted the end of his paper napkin. *Should we report the theft to Mr. Hearst?*

Hell no. That'd queer my pitch. Some representatives of an all-powerful Company we'd look, wouldn't we, letting mortals steal stuff out of our rooms? No. Here's what you do: see if you can talk to the people who left the theater early, one by one. Just sort of engage them in casual conversation.

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Find out where each one of the suspects went, and see if you can cross-check their stories with others.

Lewis looked panicked. *But—I'm only a Literature Preservation Specialist. Isn't this interrogation sort of thing more in your line of work, as a Facilitator?*

Maybe, but right now I've got my hands full, I responded, just as the lord of the manor came striding into the room.

Mr. Hearst was wearing jodhpurs and boots, was flushed with exertion. He hadn't got up late after all, but had been out on horseback surveying his domain, like one of the old Californio dons. He hit me with a triumphant look as he marched past, but didn't stop. Instead he went straight up to Mrs. Bryce's chair and took off his hat to address her. Conqueror Worm looked up and him and cowered, then ran to hide behind the chair.

"Ma'am, I was so sorry to hear about your little dog! I hope you'll do me the honor of picking out another from my kennels? I don't think we have any chihuahuas at present, but in my experience a puppy consoles you a good deal when you lose an old canine friend," he told her, with a lot more power and breath in his voice than he'd had last night. The PT3 was working, that much was certain.

Mrs. Bryce looked up from her meditation, startled. Smiling radiantly she rose to her feet.

"Why, Mr. Hearst, you are too kind," she replied. No malarkey about ascendance to astral planes with him, I noticed. He offered her his arm and they swept out through the French doors, with Conqueror Worm running after them desperately.

What happens when we've narrowed down the list of suspects? Lewis tugged at my attention.

Then we steal the script back, I told him.

But how? Lewis tore his paper napkin clean in half. *Even if we move fast enough to confuse the surveillance cameras in the halls—*

We'll figure something out, I replied, and then shushed him, because Marion came floating in.

Floating isn't much of an exaggeration, and there was no booze doing the levitation for her this morning. Marion Davies was one happy mortal. She spotted Connie and made straight for her. Connie looked up and offered a glass.

"I saved ya some Arranch Use, Marion," she said meaningfully. The orange juice was probably laced with gin. She and Marion were drinking buddies.

"Never mind that! C'mere," Marion told her, and they went over to whisper and giggle in a corner. Connie was looking incredulous.

And are you sure we can rule the servants out? Lewis persisted.

Maybe, I replied, and shushed him again, because Marion had noticed me and broken off her chat with Connie, her smile fading. She got up and approached me hesitantly.

"J-Joe? I need to ask you about something."

"Please, take my seat, Miss Davies." Lewis rose and pulled the chair out for her. "I was just going for a stroll."

"Gee, he's a gentleman, too," Marion said, giggling, but there was a little

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edge under her laughter. She sank down across from me, and waited until Lewis had taken his empty plate and departed before she said:

"Did you—um—come up here to ask Pops for m-money?"

"Aw, hell, no," I said in my best Regular Guy voice. "I wouldn't do something like that, Marion."

"Well, I didn't really think so," she admitted, looking at the table and pushing a few grains of spilled salt around with her fingertip. "He doesn't pay blackmailers, you know. But—y-you've got a reputation as a man who knows a lot of secrets, and I just thought—if you'd used me to get up here to talk to him—" She looked at me with narrowed eyes. "That wouldn't be very nice."

"No, it wouldn't," I agreed. "And I swear I didn't come up here to do anything like that. Honest."

Marion just nodded. "The other thing I thought it might be," she went on, "was that you might be selling some kind of patent medicine. A lot of people know he's interested in longevity, and it looked like he'd been drinking something red out of his coffee cup, you see." Her mouth was hard. "He may be a millionaire and he's terribly smart, but people take advantage of him all the time."

"Not me," I said, and looked around as though I wanted to see who might be listening. I leaned across the table to speak close to her ear. "Listen, honey, the truth is—I really did need his advice about something. And he was kind enough to listen. But it's a private matter and believe me, *he's* not the one being blackmailed. See?"

"Oh!" She thought she saw. "Is it Mr. Mayer?"

"Why, no, not at all," I answered hurriedly, in a tone that implied exactly the opposite. Her face cleared.

"Gee, poor Mr. Mayer," she said. She knitted her brows. "So you didn't give W.R. any kind of . . . spring tonic or something?"

"Where would I get something like that?" I looked confused, as I would be if I were some low-level studio dick who handled crises for executives and had never heard of PT3.

"Yeah." Marion reached over and patted my hand. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to be sure."

"I don't blame you," I said, getting to my feet. "But please don't worry, okay?"

She had nothing to worry about, after all. Unlike me. I still had to talk to Mr. Hearst.

I strolled out through the grounds to look for him. He found me first, though, looming abruptly into my path.

"Mr. Denham." Hearst grinned at me. "I must commend you on that stuff. It works. Have you communicated with your people?"

"Yes, sir, I have," I assured him, keeping my voice firm and hearty.

"Good. Walk with me, will you? I'd like to hear what they had to say." He started off, and I had to run to fall into step beside him.

"Well—they've agreed to your terms. I must say I'm a little surprised." I laughed in an embarrassed kind of way. "I never thought it was possible to grant a mortal what you're asking for, but you know how it is—the rank and file aren't told everything, I guess."

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"I suspected that was how it was," Hearst told me placidly. His little dachshund came racing to greet him. He scooped her up and she licked his face in excitement. "So. How is this to be arranged?"

"As far as the shares of stock go, there'll be another gentleman getting in touch with you pretty soon," I said. "I'm not sure what name he'll be using, but you'll know him. He'll mention my name, just as I mentioned Mr. Shaw's."

"Very good. And the other matter?"

Boy, the other matter. "I can give you a recipe for a tonic you'll drink on a daily basis," I said, improvising. "Your own staff can make it up."

"As simple as that?" He looked down at me sidelong, and so did the dog. "Is it the recipe for what I drank last night?"

"Oh, no, sir," I told him truthfully. "No, this will be something to prolong your life until the date history decrees that you *appear* to die. See? But it'll all be faked. One of our doctors will be there to pronounce you dead, and instead of being taken away to a mortuary, you'll go to one of our hospitals and be made immortal in a new body."

That part was a whopping big bald-faced lie, of course. I felt sweat beading on my forehead again, as we walked along through the garden and Hearst took his time about replying.

"It all sounds plausible," he said at last. "Though of course I've no way of knowing whether your people will keep their word. Have I?"

"You'd just have to trust us," I agreed. "But look at the way you feel right now! Isn't that proof enough?"

"It's persuasive," he replied, but left the sentence unfinished. We walked on. Okay, I needed to impress him again.

"See that pink rose?" I pointed to a bush about a hundred yards away, where one big bloom was just opening.

"I see it, Mr. Denham."

"Count to three, okay?"

"One," Hearst said, and I was holding the rose in front of his eyes. He went pale. Then he smiled again, wide and genuine. The little dog *whuffed* at me uncertainly.

"Pretty good," he said. "And can you 'put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes'?"

"I might, if I could fly," I said. "No wings, though. You don't want wings too, do you, Mr. Hearst?"

He just laughed. "Not yet. I believe I'll go wash up now, and then head off to the tennis court. Do you play, Mr. Denham?"

"Gee, I just love tennis," I replied, "but, you know, I got all the way up here and discovered I'd only packed one tennis shoe?"

"Oh, I'll have a pair brought out for you." Hearst looked down at my feet. "You're, what, about a size six?"

"Yes, sir," I said with a sinking feeling.

"They'll be waiting for you at the court," Hearst informed me. "Try to play down to my speed, will you?" He winked hugely and ambled away.

I was on my way back to the breakfast room with the vague hope of drinking a bottle of pancake syrup or something when I came upon Lewis. He was creeping along a garden path, keenly watching a flaxen-haired figure slumped on a marble bench amid the roses.

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"What are you doing, Lewis?" I said.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" he replied *sotto voce.* "I'm stalking Garbo."

"All right . . . " I must have looked dubious, because he drew himself up indignantly.

"Can you think of any other way to start a casual conversation with her?" he demanded. "And I've worked out a way—" he looked around and transmitted the rest, *I've worked out quite a clever way of detecting the guilty party.*

Oh yeah?

You see, I just engage Garbo in conversation and then sort of artlessly mention that I didn't catch the end of Going Hollywood *because I had a dreadful migraine headache, so I went back to my room early, and would she tell me how it came out? And if she's not the thief, she'll just explain that she left early too and has no idea how it turned out. But! If she's the one who took the script, she'll know I'm lying, because she'll have been in my room and seen I wasn't there. And she'll be so disconcerted that her blood pressure will rise, her pulse will race, her pupils will dilate and she'll display all the other physical manifestations that would show up on a polygraph if I happened to be using one! And then I'll know.*

Ingenious, I admitted. *Worked all the time for me, when I was an Inquisitor.*

Thank you. Lewis beamed.

Of course, first you have to get Garbo to talk to you.

Lewis nodded, looking determined. He resumed his ever-so-cautious advance on the Burning Icicle. I shrugged and went back to La Casa Del Sol to change into tennis togs.

Playing tennis with W.R. Hearst called for every ounce of the guile and finesse that had made me a champion in the Black Legend All-Stars, believe me. I had to demonstrate all kinds of hyperfunction stunts a mortal wouldn't be able to do, like appearing on both sides of the net at once, just to impress him with my immortalness; and yet I had to avoid killing the old man with the ball, and—oh yeah—let him win somehow, too. I'd like to see Bill Tilden try it some time.

It was hell. Hearst seemed to think it was funny; at least, he was in a great mood watching me run around frantically while he kept his position in center court, solid as a tower. He returned my sissy serves with all the force of cannon fire. His dog watched from beyond the fence, standing up on her hind legs to bark suspiciously. She was *sure* there was something funny about me now. Thank God Gable put in an appearance after about an hour of this, and I was able to retire to the sidelines and wheeze, and swear a tougher hour was never wasted there. Hearst paused before his game long enough to make a brief call from a courtside phone. Two minutes later, there was a smiling servant offering me a glass of ice-cold ginger ale.

Gable didn't beat Hearst, either, and I think he actually tried. Clark wasn't much of a toady.

I begged off to go shower—dark hairy guys who play tennis in hyperfunction tend to stink—and slipped out afterward to do some reconnoitering.

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Tonight I planned to slip in some minor heart surgery on Hearst as he slept, to guarantee those eighteen years the Company was giving him. The trick was going to be getting in undetected. There had to be another way to reach Hearst's rooms besides his private elevator, but there were no stairs visible in any of the rooms I'd been in. How did the servants get up there?

Prowling slowly around the house and bouncing sonar waves off the outside, I found a couple of ways to ascend. The best, for my purposes, was a tiny spiral staircase that was entered from the east terrace. I could sneak through the garden, go straight up, find my way to Hearst's bedroom and depart the same way once I'd fixed his heart. I could even wear the tennis shoes he'd so thoughtfully loaned me.

I was wandering in the direction of the Neptune pool when there was a hell of a racket from the shrubbery ahead of me. Conqueror Worm came darting out, yapping savagely. I was composed enough not to kick him as he raced up to my ankles. He growled and backed away when I bared my teeth at him in my friendliest fashion.

"Hi, doggie," I said. "Poor little guy, where's your mistress?"

A dark-veiled figure that had been standing perfectly still on the other side of the hedge decided to move, and Cartimandua Bryce walked forward calling out:

"Conqueror! Oh! Conqueror, you mustn't challenge Mr. Denham." She came around the corner and saw me.

There was a pause. I think she was waiting for me to demand in astonishment how she'd known it was me, but instead I inquired:

"Where's your new dog?"

"Still in Mr. Hearst's kennels," she replied, with a proud lift of her head. "Dear Mr. Hearst is having a traveling-basket made for her. Such a kind man!"

"He's a swell guy, all right," I agreed.

"And just as generous in this life as in his others," she went on. "But, you know, being a Caesar taught him that. Ruling the Empire either ennobled a man or brought out his worst vices. Clearly, our host was one of those on whom the laurel crown conferred refinement. Of course, he is a very old soul."

"No kidding?"

"Oh, yes. He has come back many, many times. Many are the names he has borne: Pharaoh, and Caesar, and High King," Mrs. Bryce told me, in as matter-of-fact a voice as though she was listing football trophies. "He has much work to do on this plane of existence, you see. Of course, you may well wonder how I know these things."

"Gee, Mrs. Bryce, how do you know these things?" I asked, just to be nice.

"It is my gift," she said, with a little sad smile, and she sighed. "My gift and my curse, you see. The spirits whisper to me constantly. I described this terrible and wonderful affliction in my novel *Black Covenant,* which of course was based on one of my own past lives."

"I don't think I've read that one," I admitted.

"A sad tale, as so many of them are," she said, sighing again. "In the ro-

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mantic Scottish Highlands of the thirteenth century, a beautiful young girl discovers she has an uncanny ability to sense both past and future lives of everyone she meets. Her gift brings inevitable doom upon her, of course. She finds her long-lost love, who was a soldier under Mark Antony when she was one of Cleopatra's handmaidens, and is now a gallant highwayman—I mean her lover, of course—and, sensing his inevitable death on the gallows, she dares to die with him."

"That's sad, all right." I agreed. "How'd it sell?"

"It was received by the discerning public with their customary sympathy," Mrs. Bryce replied.

"Is that the one they're doing a screenplay on?" I inquired.

"No," she said, looking me up and down. "That's *Passionate Girl,* the story of Mary, Queen of Scots, told from the unique perspective of her faithful terrier. I may yet persuade Miss Garbo to accept the lead role But, Mr. Denham—I am sensing something about you. Wait. You work in the film industry—"

"Yeah, for Louis B. Mayer," I said.

"And yet—and yet—" She took a step back and shaded her eyes as she looked at me. "I sense more. You cast a long shadow, Mr. Denham. Why—you, too, are an old soul!"

"Oh yeah?" I said, scanning her critically for Crome's radiation. Was she one of those mortals with a fluky electromagnetic field? They tend to receive data other mortals don't get, the way some people pick up radio broadcasts with tooth fillings, because their personal field bleeds into the temporal wave. I couldn't sense anything out of the ordinary in Mrs. Bryce, though. Was she buttering me up because she thought I could talk Garbo into starring in *Passionate Girl* at MGM? Well, she didn't know much about my relationship with Greta.

"Yes—yes—I see you in the Mediterranean area—I see you dueling with a band of street youths—is it in Venice, in the time of the Doges? Yes. And before that . . . I see you in Egypt, Mr. Denham, during the captivity of the Israelites. You loved a girl . . . yet there was another man, an overseer. . . ." Conqueror Worm might be able to tell there was something different about me, but his mistress was scoring a big metaphysical zero.

"Really?"

"Yes," she said, lowering her eyes from the oak tree above us, where she had apparently been reading all this stuff. "Do you experience disturbing visions, Mr. Denham? Dreams, perhaps of other places, other times?"

"Yeah, actually," I couldn't resist saying.

"Ah. If you desire to seek further—I may be able to help you." She came close and put her hand on my arm. Conqueror Worm prowled around her ankles, whining like a gnat. "I have some experience in, shall we say, arcane matters? It wouldn't be the first time I have assisted a questing soul in unraveling the mystery of his past lives. Indeed, you might almost call me a detective . . . for I sense you enjoy the works of Mr. Dashiell Hammett," she finished, with a smile as enigmatic as the Mona Lisa.

I smiled right back at her. Conqueror Worm put his tail between his legs and howled.

"Gosh, Mrs. Bryce, that's really amazing," I said, reaching for her hand

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and shaking it. "I do like detective fiction." And there was no way she could have known it unless she'd been in my room going through my drawers, where she'd have seen my well-worn copy of *The Maltese Falcon.* "Did your spirits tell you that?"

"Yes," she said modestly, and she was lying through her teeth, if her skin conductivity and pulse were any indication. Lewis was right, you see: we can tell as much as a polygraph about whether or not a mortal is truthful.

"You don't say?" I let go her hand. "Well, well. This has been really interesting, Mrs. Bryce. I've got to go see how my friend is doing now, but, you know, I'd really like to get together to talk with you about this again. Soon."

"Ah! Your friend with the fair hair," she said, and looked wise. Then she stepped in close and lowered her voice. "The haunted one. Tell me, Mr. Denham . . . is he . . . inclined to the worship of Apollo?"

For a moment I was struck speechless, because Lewis does go on sometimes about his Roman cultural identity, but then I realized that wasn't what Mrs. Bryce was implying.

"You mean, is he a homo?"

"Given to sins of the purple and crimson nature," she rephrased, nodding.

Now I knew she had the Valentino script, had seen Rudy's cute note and leaped to her own conclusions. "Uh . . . gee. I don't know. I guess he might be. Why?"

"There is a male spirit who will not rest until he communicates with your friend," Mrs. Bryce told me, breathing heavily. "A fiery soul with a great attachment to Mr. Kensington. One who has but recently passed over. A beautiful shade, upright as a smokeless flame."

The only question now was, why? One thing was certain: whether or not Lewis had ever danced the tango with Rudolph Valentino, Mrs. Bryce sure wished she had. Was she planning some stunt to impress the hell out of all these movie people, using her magic powers to reveal the script's whereabouts if Lewis reported it missing?

"I wonder who it is?" I said. "I'll tell him about it. Of course, you know, he might be kind of embarrassed—"

"But of course." She waved gracefully, as though dismissing all philistine considerations of closets. "If he will speak to me privately, I can do him a great service."

"Okay, Mrs. Bryce," I said, winking, and we went our separate ways through the garden.

I caught up with Lewis in the long pergola, tottering along between the kumquat trees. His tie was askew, his hair was standing on end, and his eyes shone like a couple of blue klieg lights.

"The most incredible thing just happened to me," he said.

"How'd you make out with Garbo?" I inquired, and then my jaw dropped, because he drew himself up and said, with an effort at dignity:

"I'll thank you not to speculate on a lady's private affairs."

"Oh, for crying out loud!" I hoped he'd had the sense to stay out of the range of the surveillance cameras.

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"But I can tell you this much," he said, as his silly grin burst through again, "she absolutely did not steal my Valentino script."

"Yeah, I know," I replied. "Cartimandua Bryce took it after all."

"She—Really?" Lewis focused with difficulty. "However did you find out?"

"We were talking just now and she gave the game away," I explained. "Oldest trick in the book, for fake psychics: snoop through people's belongings in secret so you know little details about them you couldn't have known otherwise, then pull 'em out in conversation and wow everybody with your mystical abilities.

"What do you want to bet that's what she was doing when she sneaked out of the theater? She must have used the time to case people's rooms. That's how the damn dog got in our suite. It must have followed her somehow and gotten left behind."

"How sordid," Lewis said. "How are we going to get it back, then?"

"We'll think of a way." I said. "I have a feeling she'll approach you herself, anyhow. She's dying to corner you and give you a big wet kiss from the ghost of Rudolph Valentino, who she thinks is your passionate dead boyfriend. You just play along."

Lewis winced. "That's revolting."

I shrugged. "So long as you get the script back, who cares what she thinks?"

"I care," Lewis protested. "I have a reputation to think about!"

"Like the opinions of a bunch of mortals are going to matter in a hundred years!" I said. "Anyway, I'll bet you've had to do more embarrassing things in the Company's service. I know I have."

"Such as?" Lewis demanded sullenly.

"Such as I don't care to discuss just at the present time," I told him, flouncing away with a grin. He grabbed a pomegranate and hurled it at me, but I winked out and reappeared a few yards off, laughing. The lunch bell rang.

I don't know what Lewis did with the rest of his afternoon, but I suspect he spent it hiding. Myself, I took things easy; napped in the sunlight, went swimming in the Roman pool, and relaxed in the guest library with a good book. By the time we gathered in the assembly hall for cocktail hour again, I was refreshed and ready for a long night's work.

The gathering was a lot more fun now that I wasn't so nervous about Mr. Hearst. Connie got out a Parcheesi game and we sat down to play with Charlie and Laurence. The Hearst kid and his girlfriend took over one of the pianos and played amateurish duets. Mrs. Bryce made a sweeping entrance and backed Gable into a corner, trying out her finder-of-past-lives routine on him. Marion circulated for a while, before getting into a serious discussion of real estate investments with Jack from Paramount. Mr. Hearst came down in the elevator and was promptly surrounded by his executives, who wanted to discuss business. Garbo appeared late, smiling to herself as she wandered over to the other piano and picked out tunes with one finger.

Lewis skulked in at the last moment, just as we were all getting up to go to dinner, and tried to look as though he'd been there all along. The

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ladies went in first. As she passed him, Garbo reached out and tousled his hair, though she didn't say a word.

The rest of us—Mr. Hearst included—gaped at Lewis. He just straightened up, threw his shoulders back and swaggered into the dining hall after the ladies. My place card was immediately at Mr. Hearst's right, and Lewis was seated on the other side of me. It didn't get better than this. I looked nearly as smug as Lewis as I sat down with my loaded plate. Cartimandua Bryce had been given the other place of honor, though, at Marion's right, I guess as a further consolation prize for the loss of Tcho-Tcho. Conqueror Worm was allowed to stay in her lap through the meal this time. He took one look at me and cringed down meek as a lamb, only lifting his muzzle for the tidbits Mrs. Bryce fed him.

She held forth on the subject of reincarnation as we dined, with Marion drawing her out and throwing the rest of us an occasional broad wink, though not when Hearst was looking. He had very strict ideas about courtesy toward guests, even if he clearly thought she was a crackpot.

"So what you're saying is, we just go on and on through history, the same people coming back time after time?" Marion inquired.

"Not all of us," Mrs. Bryce admitted. "Some, I think, are weaker souls and fade after the first thundering torrent of life has finished with them. They are like those who retire from the ball after but one dance, too weary to respond any longer to the fierce call of life's music."

"They just soita go ova to da punchbowl and stay there, huh?" said Connie.

"In a sense," Mrs. Bryce told her, graciously ignoring her teasing tone. "The punchbowl of Lethe, if you will; and there they imbibe forgetfulness and remain. Ah, but the stronger souls plunge back headlong into the maelstrom of mortal passions!"

"Well, but what about going to Heaven and all that stuff?" Marion wanted to know. "Don't we ever get to do that?"

"Oh, undoubtedly," Mrs. Bryce replied, "for there are higher astral planes beyond this mere terrestrial one we inhabit. The truly great souls ascend there in time, as that is their true home; but even they yield to the impulse to assume flesh and descend to the mundane realms again, especially if they have important work to do here." She inclined across the table to Hearst. "As I feel *you* have often done, dear Mr. Hearst."

"Well, I plan on coming back after this life, anyhow," he replied with a smile, and nudged me under the table. I nearly dropped my fork.

"I don't know that I'd want to," said Marion a little crossly. "My g-goodness, I think I'd rather have a nice rest afterward, and not come back and have to go fighting through the whole darned business all over again."

Hearst lifted his head and regarded her for a long moment.

"Wouldn't you, dear?" he said.

"N-no," Marion insisted, and laughed. "It'd be great to have some peace and quiet for a change."

Mrs. Bryce just nodded, as though to show that proved her point. Hearst looked down at his plate and didn't say anything else for the moment.

"But anyway, Mrs. Bryce," Marion went on in a brighter voice. "Who else do you think's an old soul? What about the world leaders right now?"

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"Chancellor Hitler, certainly," Mrs. Bryce informed us. "One has only to look at the immense dynamism of the man! This, surely, was a Teutonic Knight, or perhaps one of the barbarian chieftains who defied Caesar."

"Unsuccessfully," said Hearst in a dry little voice.

"Yes, but to comprehend reincarnation is to see history in its true light," Mrs. Bryce explained. "Over the centuries his star has risen inexorably, and will continue to rise. He is a man with true purpose."

"You don't feel that way about Franklin Delano Roosevelt, do you?" Hearst inquired.

"Roosevelt strives," said Mrs. Bryce noncommittally. "But I think his is yet a young soul, blundering perhaps as it finds its way."

"I think he's an insincere bozo, personally," Hearst said.

"Unlike Mussolini! Now there is another man who understands historical destiny, to such an extent one knows he has retained the experience of his past lives."

"I'm afraid I don't think much of dictators," said Hearst, in that castle where his word was law. Mrs. Bryce's eyes widened with the consciousness of her misstep.

"No, for your centuries—perhaps even eons—have given you the wisdom to see that dictatorship is a crude substitute for enlightened rule," she said.

"By which you mean good old American democracy?" he inquired. Wow, Mrs. Bryce was sweating. I have to admit it felt good to sit back and watch it happen to somebody else for a change.

"Well, of course she does," Marion said. "Now, I've had enough of all this history talk, Pops."

"I wanna know more about who *we* all were in our past lives, anyway," said Connie. Mrs. Bryce joined in the general laughter then, shrill with relief.

"Well, as I was saying earlier to Mr. Gable—I feel certain he was Mark Antony."

All eyes were on Clark at this pronouncement. He turned beet red but smiled wryly.

"I never argue with a lady," he said. "Maybe I was, at that."

"Oh, beyond question you were, Mr. Gable," said Mrs. Bryce. "For I myself was one of Cleopatra's maidens-in-waiting, and I recognized you the moment I saw you."

Must be a script for *Black Covenant* in development too.

There were chuckles up and down the table. "Whaddaya do to find out about odda people?" Connie persisted. "Do ya use one of dose ouija boards or something?"

"A crude parlor game," Mrs. Bryce said. "In my opinion. No, the best way to delve into the secrets of the past is to speak directly to those who are themselves beyond the flow of time."

"Ya mean, have a séance?" Connie looked intrigued. Marion's eyes lit up.

"That'd be fun, wouldn't it? Jeepers, we've got the perfect setting, too, with all this old stuff around!"

"Now—I don't know—" said Hearst, but Marion had the bit in her teeth.

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"Oh, come on, it can't hurt anybody. Are you all done eating? What do you say, kids?"

"Aren't you supposed to have a round table?" asked Jack doubtfully.

"Not necessarily," Mrs. Bryce told him. "This very table will do, if we clear away dinner and turn out the lights."

There was a scramble to do as she suggested. Hearst turned to look at me sheepishly, and then I guess the humor of it got to him: an immortal being sitting in on a séance. He pressed his lips together to keep from grinning. I shrugged, looking wise and ironic.

Marion came running back from the kitchen and took her place at table. "Okay," she yelled to the butler, and he flicked an unseen switch. The dining hall was plunged into darkness.

"Whadda we do now?" Connie asked breathlessly.

"Consider the utter darkness and the awful chill for a moment," replied Mrs. Bryce in somber tones. "Think of the grave, if you are tempted to mock our proceedings. And now, if you are all willing to show a proper respect for the spirits—link hands, please."

There was a creaking and rustling as we obeyed her. I felt Hearst's big right hand enclose my left one. Lewis took my other hand. *Good Lord, it's dark in here,* he transmitted.

So watch by infrared, I told him. I switched it on myself; the place looked really lurid then, but I had a suspicion about what was going to happen and I wanted to be prepared.

"Spirits of the unseen world," intoned Mrs. Bryce. "Ascended ones! Pause in your eternal meditations and heed our petition. We seek enlightenment! Ah, yes, I begin to feel the vibrations—there is one who approaches us. Can it be? But yes, it is our dear friend Tcho-Tcho! Freed from her disguise of earthly flesh, she once again parts the veil between the worlds. Tcho-Tcho, I sense your urgency. What have you to tell us, dear friend? Speak!"

I think most of the people in the room anticipated some prankster barking at that point, but oddly enough nobody did, and in the strained moment of silence that followed Mrs. Bryce let her head sag forward. Then, slowly, she raised it again, and tilted it way back. She gasped a couple of times and then began to moan in a tiny falsetto voice, incoherent sounds as though she were trying to form words.

"*Wooooo,*" she wailed softly. "*Woooo Woo Woo Woo! Woo Woooo!*"

There were vibrations then, all right, from fourteen people trying to hold in their giggles. Mrs. Bryce tossed her head from side to side.

"*Wooooo,*" she went on, and Conqueror Worm sat up in her lap and pointed his snout at the ceiling and began to talk along with her in that way that dogs will, sort of *Wou-wou, wou-wou wou,* and beside me Hearst was shaking with silent laughter. Mrs. Bryce must have sensed she was losing her audience, because the woo-woos abruptly began to form into distinct words:

"*I have come back,*" she said. "*I have returned from the vale of felicity because I have unfinished business here. Creatures of the lower plane, there are spirits waiting with me who would communicate with you. Cast aside all ignorant fear. Listen for them!*"

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After another moment of silence Marion said, in a strangling kind of voice: "Um—we were just wondering—can you tell us who any of us were in our past lives?"

"*Yes. . . .*" Mrs. Bryce appeared to be listening hard. "*There is one . . . she was born on the Nineteenth day of April.*"

Connie sat up straight and peered through the darkness in Mrs. Bryce's direction. "Why, dat's my boithday!" she said in a stage whisper.

"*Yes . . . I see her in Babylon, Babylon that is fallen . . . yea, truly she lived in Babylon, queen of cities all, and carried roses to lay before Ishtar's altar.*"

"Jeez, can ya beat it?" Connie exclaimed. "I musta been a priestess or something."

"*Pass on now . . . I see a man, hard and brutal . . . he labors with his hands. He stands before towers that point at heaven . . . black gold pours forth. He has been too harsh. He repents . . . he begs forgiveness. . . .*"

I could see Gable gritting his teeth so hard the muscles in his jaws stood out. His eyes were furious. I wondered if she'd seen a photograph of his father in his luggage. Or had Mrs. Bryce scooped this particular bit of biographical detail out of a movie magazine?

Anyway he stubbornly refused to take the bait, and after a prolonged silence the quavery voice continued:

"*Pass on, pass on. . . . There is one here who has sailed the mighty oceans. I see him in a white cap. . . .*"

There was an indrawn breath from one of Hearst's executives. Somebody who enjoyed yachting?

"*Yet he has sailed the seven seas in another life. . . . I see him kneeling before a great queen, presenting her with all the splendor of the Spanish fleet . . . this entity bore the name of Francis Drake.*"

Rapacious little pirate turned cutthroat executive? Hey, it could happen.

"*Pass on now. . . .*" I could see Mrs. Bryce turn her head slightly and peer in Lewis' direction through half-closed eyes. "*Oh, there is an urgent message . . . there is one here who pleads to speak . . . this spirit with his dark and smoldering gaze . . . he begs to be acknowledged without shame, for no true passion is shameful . . . he seeks his other self.*"

Yikes! transmitted Lewis, horrified.

Okay. She wanted to convince us Rudolph Valentino was trying to say something? He was going to say something, all right. I didn't care whether Lewis *or* Rudy were straight or gay or swung both ways, but this was just too mean-spirited.

I pulled my right hand free from Lewis' and wriggled the left one loose from Hearst's. He turned his head in my direction and I felt a certain speculative amusement from him, but he said nothing to stop me.

So here's what Hearst's surveillance cameras and Dictaphones recorded next: a blur moving through the darkness and a loud crash, as of cymbals. Tcho-Tcho's voice broke off with a little scream.

Next there was a man's voice speaking out of the darkness, but from way high up in the air where no mortal could possibly be—like on the tiny ledge above the wall of choir stalls. If you'd ever heard Valentino speak (like I had, for instance) you'd swear it was him yelling in a rage:

"*I am weary of lies! There is a thief here, and if what has been stolen is*

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not returned tonight, the djinni of the desert will avenge. The punishing spirits of the afterlife will pursue! Do you DARE to cross me?"

Then there was a hiss and a faint smell of sulfur, and gasps and little shrieks from the assembled company as an apparition appeared briefly in the air: Valentino's features, and who could mistake them? His mouth was grim, his eyes hooded with stern determination, just the same expression as Sheik Ahmed had worn advancing on Vilma Banky. Worse still, they were eerily pallid against a scarlet shadow. Somebody screamed, really screamed in terror.

The image vanished, there was another crash, and then a confused moment in which the servants ran in shouting and the lights were turned on.

Everybody was sitting where they had been when the lights had gone out, including me. Down at the end of the table, though, where nobody was sitting, one of Mr. Hearst's collection of eighteenth-century silver platters was spinning around like a phonograph record.

Everyone stared at it, terrified, and the only noise in that cavernous place was the slight rattling as the thing spun slowly to a stop.

"Wow," said the Hearst kid in awe. His father turned slowly to look at me. I met his eyes and pulled out a handkerchief. I was sweating again, but you would be too, you know? And I used the gesture to drop the burnt-out match I had palmed.

"What the hell's going on?" said Gable, getting to his feet. He stalked down the table to the platter and halted, staring at it.

"What is it?" said Jack.

Gable reached out cautiously and lifted the platter in his hands. He tilted it up so everybody could see. There was a likeness of Valentino smeared on the silver, in some red substance.

"Jeez!" screamed Connie.

"What *is* that stuff?" said Laurence. "Is it blood?"

"Is it ectoplasm?" demanded one of the executives.

Gable peered at it closely.

"It's ketchup," he announced. "Aw, for Christ's sake."

Everyone's gaze was promptly riveted on the ketchup bottle just to Mr. Hearst's right. Hard as they stared at it, I don't think anybody noticed that it was five inches further to his right than it had been when the lights went out.

Or maybe Mr. Hearst noticed. He pressed his napkin to his mouth and began to shiver like a volcano about to explode, squeezing his eyes shut as tears ran down.

"P-P-Pops!" Marion practically climbed over the table to him, thinking he was having a heart attack.

"I'm okay—" He put out a hand to her, gulping for breath, and she realized he was laughing. That broke the tension. There were nervous guffaws and titters from everyone in the room except Cartimandua Bryce, who was pale and silent at her place. Conqueror Worm was still crouched down in her lap, trembling, trying to be The Little Dog Who Wasn't There.

"Gee, that was some neat trick somebody pulled off!" said young Hearst.

Mrs. Bryce drew a deep breath and rose to her feet, clutching Conqueror Worm.

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"Or—was it?" she said composedly. She swept the room with a glance. "If anyone here has angered the spirit of Rudolph Valentino, I leave it to his or her discretion to make amends as swiftly as possible. Mr. Hearst? This experience has taken much of the life force from me. I must rest. I trust you'll excuse me?"

"Sure," wheezed Hearst, waving her away.

She made a proudly dignified exit. I glanced over at Lewis, who stared back at me with wide eyes.

Nice work, he transmitted. I grinned at him.

I wouldn't go off to your room too early, I advised. *Give her time to put the script back.*

Okay.

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you," Hearst said at last, sighing, "but I'm ready for some ice cream, after that."

So we had ice cream and then went in to watch the movie, which was *Dinner at Eight.* Everybody stayed through to the end. I thought it was a swell story.

Lewis and I walked back to La Casa Del Sol afterward, scanning carefully, but nobody was lurking along the paths. No horrible little dog leaped out at me when I turned on the light in my room, either.

"It's here," I heard Lewis crowing.

"The script? Safe and sound?"

"Every page!" Lewis appeared in my doorway, clutching it to his chest. "Thank God. I think I'll sleep with it under my pillow tonight."

"And dream of Rudy?" I said, leering.

"Oh, shut up." He pursed his lips and went off to his room.

I relaxed on my bed while I listened to him changing into his pajamas, brushing his teeth, gargling and all the stuff even immortals have to do before bedtime. He climbed into bed and turned out the light, and maybe he dreamed about Rudy, or even Garbo. I monitored his brainwaves until I was sure he slept deeply enough. Time for the stuff he didn't need to know about.

I changed into dark clothes and laced up the tennis shoes Hearst had loaned me. Opening my black case, I slid out its false bottom and withdrew the sealed prepackaged medical kit I'd been issued from the Company HQ in Hollywood before coming up here. With it was a matchbox-sized hush field unit.

I stuck the hush unit in my pocket and slid the medical kit into my shirt. Then I slipped outside, and raced through the gardens of La Cuesta Encantada faster than Robin Goodfellow, or even Evar Swanson, could have done it.

The only time I had to pause was at the doorway on the east terrace, when it took me a few seconds to disable the alarm and pick the lock; then I was racing round and round up the staircase, and so into Hearst's private rooms.

I had the hush field unit activated before I came anywhere near him, and it was a good thing. There was still a light on in his bedroom. I tiptoed in warily all the same, hoping Marion wasn't there.

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She wasn't. She slept sound in her own room on the other end of the suite. I still froze when I entered Hearst's room, though, because Marion gazed serenely down at me from her life-sized nude portrait on the wall. I looked around. She kept pretty strange company: portraits of Hearst's mother and father hung there too, as well as several priceless paintings of the Madonna and Child. I wondered briefly what the pictures might have to say to each other, if they could talk.

Hearst was slumped unconscious in the big armchair next to his telephone. Thank God he hadn't been using it when the hush field had gone on, or there'd be a phone off the hook and a hysterical night operator sending out an alarm now. He'd only been working late, composing an editorial by the look of it, in a strong confident scrawl on a lined pad. His dachshund was curled up at his feet, snoring. I set it aside gently and, like an ant picking up a dead beetle, lifted Hearst onto his canopied bed. Then I turned on both lamps, stripped off Hearst's shirt and took out the medical kit.

The seal hissed as I broke it, and I peeled back the film to reveal . . .

The wrong medical kit.

I stared into it, horrified. What was all this stuff? This wasn't what I needed to do routine heart repair on a mortal! This was one of our own kits, the kind the Base HQ repair facilities stocked. I staggered backward and collapsed into Hearst's comfy chair. Boy, oh boy, did I want some Pep-O-Mints right then.

I sat there a minute, hearing my own heart pounding in that big quiet house.

All right, I told myself, talented improvisation is your forte, isn't it? You've done emergency surgery with less, haven't you? Sure you have. Hell, you've used flint knives and bronze mirrors and leeches and . . . there's bound to be something in that kit you can use.

I got on my feet and poked through it. Okay, here were some sterile Scrubbie Towelettes. I cleansed the area where I'd be making my incision. And here were some sterile gloves, great, I pulled those on. A scalpel. So far, so good. And a hemostim, and a skin plasterer, yeah, I could do this! And here was a bone laser. This was going to work out after all.

I gave Hearst a shot of metabolic depressant, opened him up and set to work, telling myself that somebody was going to be in big trouble when I made my report to Dr. Zeus. . . .

Hearst's ribs looked funny.

There was a thickening of bone where I was having to use the laser, in just the places I needed to make my cuts. Old trauma? Damned old. Funny-looking.

His heart looked funny too. Of course, I expected that. Hearst had a heart defect, after all. Still, I didn't expect the microscopic wired chip attached to one chamber's wall.

I could actually taste those Pep-O-Mints now. My body was simulating the sensation to comfort me, a defense against the really amazing stress I was experiencing.

I glanced over casually at the medical kit and observed that there was an almost exact duplicate of the chip, but bigger, waiting for me in a shaped compartment. So were a bunch of other little implants.

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Repairs and upgrade. This was the right kit after all.

I set down my scalpel, peeled off my gloves, took out my chronophase and opened its back. I removed a small component. Turning to Hearst's phone, I clamped the component to its wire and picked up the receiver. I heard weird noises and then a smooth voice informing me I had reached Hollywood HQ.

"This is Facilitator Joseph and WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE?" I demanded.

"Downloading file," the voice replied sweetly.

I went rigid as the encoded signal came tootling through the line to me. Behind my eyes flashed the bright images: I was getting a mission report, filed in 1862, by a Facilitator Jabesh . . . assigned to monitor a young lady who was a passenger on a steamer bound from New York to the Isthmus of Panama, and from there to San Francisco. She was a recent bride, traveling with her much older husband. She was two months pregnant. I saw the pretty girl in pink, I saw the rolling seas, I saw the ladies in their bustles and the tophatted guys with muttonchop whiskers.

The girl was very ill. Ordinary morning sickness made worse by *mal de mer*? Jabesh—there, man in black, tipping his stovepipe hat to her—posing as a kindly doctor, attended her daily. One morning she fainted in her cabin and her husband pulled Jabesh in off the deck to examine her. Jabesh sent him for a walk around the ship and prepared to perform a standard obstetric examination on the unconscious girl.

Jabesh's horrified face: almost into his hands she miscarried a severely damaged embryo. It was not viable. His frantic communication, next, on the credenza concealed in his doctor's bag. The response: PRIORITY GOLD, with an authorization backed up by Executive Facilitator General Aegeus. The child was to live, at all costs. He was to make it viable. Why? Was the Company making certain that history happened *as written* again? But how could he save this child? With what? Where did he even start?

He downloaded family records. Here was an account of the husband having had a brother "rendered helpless" by an unspecified disease and dying young. Some lethal recessive? Nobody could make this poor little lump of flesh live! But the Company had issued a Priority Gold.

I saw the primitive stateroom, the basin of bloody water, Jabesh's shirtsleeves rolled up, his desperation. The Priority Gold blinking away at him from his credenza screen.

We're not bound by the laws of mortals, but we do have our own laws. Rules that are never broken under any circumstances, regulations that carry terrible penalties if they're not adhered to. We can be punished with memory effacement, or worse.

Unless we're obeying a Priority Gold. Or so rumor has it.

Jabesh repaired the thing, got its heart-bud beating again. It wasn't enough. Panicked, he pulled out a few special items from his bag (I had just seen one of them) and did something flagrantly illegal: he did a limited augmentation on the embryo. Still not enough.

So that was when he rolled the dice, took the chance. He did something even more flagrantly illegal.

He mended what was broken on that twisted helix of genetic material.

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He did it with an old standard issue chromosome patcher, the kind found in any operative's field repair kit. They were never intended to be used on mortals, let alone two-month-old embryos, but Jabesh didn't know what else to do. He set it on automatic and by the time he realized what it was doing, he was too late to stop the process.

It redesigned the baby's genotype. It surveyed the damage, analyzed what was lacking, and filled in the gaps with material from its own preloaded DNA arsenal. It plugged healthy chromosome sequences into the mess like deluxe Tinkertoy units until it had an organism with optimal chances for survival. That was what it was programmed to do, after all. But it had never had to replace so much in a subject, never had to dig so deeply into its arsenal for material, and some of the DNA in there was very old and very strange indeed. Those kits were first designed a hundred thousand years ago, after all, when *Homo sapiens* hadn't quite homogenized.

By the time the patcher had finished its work, the embryo had been transformed into a healthy hybrid of a kind that hadn't been born in fifty millennia, with utterly unknown potential.

I could see Jabesh managing to reimplant the thing and get the girl all tidy by the time her gruff husband came back. He was telling the husband she needed to stay off her feet and rest, he was telling him that nothing in life is certain, and tipping his tall hat, Good-Day, Sir, and staggering off to sit shaking in his cabin, drinking bourbon whiskey straight out of a case-bottle without the least effect.

He knew what he'd done. But Jabesh had obeyed the Priority Gold.

I saw him waiting, afraid of what might happen. Nothing did, except that the weeks passed, and the girl lost her pallor and became well. I could see her crossing at Panama—there was the green jungle, there was the now-visibly-pregnant mother sidesaddle on a mule—and here she was disembarking at San Francisco.

It was months before Jabesh could summon the courage to pay a call on her. Here he was being shown into the parlor, hat in hand. Nothing to see but a young mother dandling her adored boy. Madonna and child, to the life. One laughing baby looks just like another, right? So who'd ever know what Jabesh had done? And here was Jabesh taking his leave, smiling, and turning to slink away into some dark corner of history.

The funny thing was, what Jabesh had done wasn't even against the mortals' law. Yet. It wouldn't become illegal until the year 2093, because mortals wouldn't understand the consequences of genetic engineering until then.

But I understood. And now I knew why I'd wanted to turn tail and run the moment I'd laid eyes on William Randolph Hearst, just as certain dogs cowered at the sight of me.

The last images flitted before my eyes, the baby growing into the tall youth with something now subtly different about him, that unearthly voice, that indefinable quality of endlessly prolonged childhood that would worry his parents. Then! Downloaded directly into my skull before I could even flinch, the flashing letters: PRIORITY GOLD. *REPAIR AND UPGRADE*. Authorized by Facilitator General Aegeus, that same big shot who'd set up Jabesh.

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I was trapped. I had been given the order.

So what could I do? I hung up the phone, took back my adapter component, pulled on a fresh pair of gloves and took up my scalpel again.

How bad could it be, after all? I was coming in at the end of the story, anyway. Eighteen more years weren't so much, even if Hearst never should have existed in the first place. Any weird genetic stuff he might have passed on to his sons seemed to have switched off in them. And, looking at the big picture, had he really done any harm? He was even a decent guy, in his way. Too much money, enthusiasm, appetite for life, an iron will and unshakable self-assurance . . . and a mind able to think in more dimensions than a human mind should. Okay, so it was a formula for disaster.

I knew, because I remembered certain men with just that kind of zeal and ability. They had been useful to the Company, back in the old days before history began, until they had begun to argue with Company policy. Then the Company had had a problem on its hands, because the big guys were immortals. Then the Company had had to fight dirty, and take steps to see there would never be dissension in its ranks again.

But that had been a long time ago, and right now I had a Priority Gold to deal with, so I told myself Hearst was human enough. He was born of woman, wasn't he? There was her picture on the wall, right across from Marion's. And he had but a little time to live.

I replaced the old tired implants with the fresh new ones and did a repair job on his heart that ought to last the required time. Then I closed him up and did the cosmetic work, and got his shirt back on his old body.

I set him back in his chair, returned the editorial he had been writing to his lap, set the dog at his feet again, gathered up my stuff, turned off the opposite lamp and looked around to see if I'd forgotten anything. Nope. In an hour or so his heart would begin beating again and he'd be just fine, at least for a few more years.

"Live forever, oh king," I told him sardonically, and then I fled, switching off the hush field as I went.

But my words echoed a little too loudly as I ran through his palace gardens, under the horrified stars.

Hearst watched, intrigued, as Lewis slid the Valentino script behind the panel in the antique cabinet. With expert fingers Lewis worked the panel back into its grooves, rocking and sliding it gently, until there was a click and it settled into the place it would occupy for the next four centuries.

"And to think, the next man to see that thing won't even be born for years and years," Hearst said in awe. He closed the front of the cabinet and locked it. As he dropped the key in his waistcoat pocket, he looked at Lewis speculatively.

"I suppose you're an immortal too, Mr. Kensington?" he inquired.

"Well—yes, sir, I am," Lewis admitted.

"Holy Moses. And how old are you?"

"Not quite eighteen hundred and thirty, sir."

"Not quite! Why, you're no more than a baby, compared to Mr. Denham

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here, are you?" Hearst chuckled in an avuncular sort of way. "And have *you* known many famous people?"

"Er—I knew Saint Patrick," Lewis offered. "And a lot of obscure English novelists."

"Well, isn't that nice?" Mr. Hearst smiled down at him and patted him on the shoulder. "And now you can tell people you've known Greta Garbo, too."

"Yes, sir," said Lewis, and then his mouth fell open, but Hearst had already turned to me, rustling the slip of paper I had given him.

"And you say my kitchen staff can mix this stuff up, Mr. Denham?"

"Yeah. If you have any trouble finding all the ingredients, I've included the name of a guy in Chinatown who can send you seeds and plants mail-order," I told him.

"Very good," he said, nodding. "Well, I'm sorry you boys can't stay longer, but I know what those studio schedules are like. I imagine we'll run into one another again, though, don't you?"

He smiled, and Lewis and I sort of backed out of his presence salaaming.

Neither one of us said much on the way down the mountain, through all those hairpin turns and herds of wild animals. I think Lewis was scared Hearst might still somehow be able to hear us, and actually I wouldn't have put it past him to have managed to bug the Model A.

Myself, I was silent because I had begun to wonder about something, and I had no way to get an answer on it.

I hadn't taken a DNA sample from Hearst. It wouldn't have been of any use to anybody. You can't make an immortal from an old man, because his DNA, no matter how unusual it is, has long since begun the inevitable process of deterioration, the errors in replication that make it unusable for a template.

This is one of the reasons immortals can only be made from children, see? The younger you are, the more bright and new-minted your DNA pattern is. I was maybe four or five when the Company rescued me, not absolute optimum for DNA but within specs. Lewis was a newborn, which is supposed to work much better. Might fetal DNA work better still?

That being the case . . . had Jabesh kept a sample of the furtive work he'd done, in that cramped steamer cabin? Because if he had, if Dr. Zeus had it on file somewhere . . . it would take a lot of work, but the Company *might* meet the terms of William Randolph Hearst.

But they wouldn't actually ever really do such a thing, would they?

We parked in front of the general store in San Simeon and I bought five rolls of Pep-O-Mints. By the time we got to Pismo Beach I had to stop for more.

End Credits: 2333

The young man leaned forward at his console, fingers flying as he edited images, superimposed them and rearranged them into startling visuals. When he had a result that satisfied him, he put on a headset and edited in the sound, brief flares of music and dialogue. He played it all

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back and nodded in satisfaction. His efforts had produced thirty seconds of story that would hold the viewers spellbound, and leave them with the impression that Japanese Imperial troops had brutally crushed a pro-Republic riot in Mazatlan, and Californians from all five provinces were rallying to lend aid to their oppressed brothers and sisters to the south.

Nothing of the kind had occurred, of course, but if enough people thought it had, it just might become the truth. Such things were known to happen.

And it was for everyone's good, after all, because it would set certain necessary forces in motion. He believed that democracy was the best possible system, but had long since quietly acknowledged to himself that government by the people seldom worked because people were such fools. That was all right, though. If a beautiful old automobile wouldn't run, you could always hook it up to something more efficient and tow it, and pretend it was moving of its own accord. As long as it got where you wanted it to go in the end, who cared?

He sent the story for global distribution and began another one, facts inert of themselves but presented in such a way as to paint a damning picture of the Canadian Commonwealth's treatment of its Native American neighbors on the ice mining issue. When he had completed about ten seconds of the visual impasto, however, an immortal in a gray suit entered the room, carrying a disc case.

"Chief? These are the messages from Ceylon Central. Do you want to review them before or after your ride?"

"Gosh, it's that time already, isn't it?" the young man said, glancing at the temporal chart in the lower left hand corner of the monitor. "Leave them here, Quint. I'll go through them this evening."

"Yes, sir." The immortal bowed, set down the case and left. The young man rose, stretched and crossed the room to his living suite. A little dog rose from where it had been curled under his chair and followed him sleepily.

Beyond his windows the view was much the same as it had been for the last four centuries: the unspoiled wilderness of the Santa Lucia mountains as far as the eye could see in every direction, save only the west where the sea lay blue and calm. The developers had been stopped. He had seen to it.

He changed into riding clothes and paused before a mirror, combing his hair. Such animal exploitation as horseback riding was illegal, as he well knew, having pushed through the legislation that made it so himself. It was good that vicious people weren't allowed to gallop around on poor sweating beasts any more, striking and shouting at them. He never treated his horses that way, however. He loved them and was a gentle and careful rider, which was why the public laws didn't apply to him.

He turned from the mirror and found himself facing the portrait of Marion, the laughing girl of his dreams, forever young and happy and sober. He made a little courtly bow and blew her a kiss. All his loved ones were safe and past change now.

Except for his dog; it was getting old. They always did, of course. There were some things even the Company couldn't prevent, useful though it was.

Voices came floating up to him from the courtyard.

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". . . because when the government collapsed, of course Park Services didn't have any money any more," a tour docent was explaining. "For a while it looked as though the people of California were going to lose La Cuesta Encantada to foreign investors. The art treasures were actually being auctioned off, one by one. How many of you remember that antique movie script that was found in that old furniture? A few years back, during the Old Hollywood Revival?"

The young man was distracted from his reverie. Grinning, he went to the mullioned window, and peered down at the tour group assembled below. His dog followed him and he picked it up, scratching between its ears as he listened. The docent continued: "Well, that old cabinet came from here! We know that Rudolph Valentino was a friend of Marion Davies, and we think he must have left it up here on a visit, and somehow it got locked in the cabinet and forgotten until it was auctioned off, and the new owners opened the secret drawer."

One of the tourists put up a hand.

"But if everything was sold off—"

"No, you see, at the very last minute a miracle happened." The docent smiled. "William Randolph Hearst had five sons, as you know, but most of their descendants moved away from California. It turned out one of them was living in Europe. He's really wealthy, and when he heard about the Castle being sold, he flew to California to offer the Republic a deal. He bought the Castle himself, but said he'd let the people of California go on visiting Hearst Castle and enjoying its beauty."

"How wealthy is he?" one of the visitors wanted to know.

"Nobody knows just how much money he has," said the docent after a moment, sounding embarrassed. "But we're all very grateful to the present Mr. Hearst. He's actually added to the art collection you're going to see and—though some people don't like it—he's making plans to continue building here."

"Will we get to meet him?" somebody else asked.

"Oh, no. He's a very private man," said the docent. "And very busy, too. But you will get to enjoy his hospitality, as we go into the Refectory now for a buffet lunch. Do you all have your complimentary vouchers? Then please follow me inside. Remember to stay within the velvet ropes. . . ."

The visitors filed in, pleased and excited. The young man looked down on them from his high window.

He set his dog in its little bed, told it to stay, and then left by a private stair that took him down to the garden. He liked having guests. He liked watching from a distance as their faces lit up, as they stared in awe, as they shared in the beauty of his grand house and all its delights. He liked making mortals happy.

He liked directing their lives, too. He had no doubt at all of his ability to guide them, or the wisdom of his long-term goals for humanity. Besides, it was fun.

In fact, he reflected, it was one of the pleasures that made eternal life worth living. He paused for a moment in the shade of one of the ancient oak trees and looked around, smiling his terrible smile at the world he was making. O

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On Books

Paul Di Filippo

All Summerland in a Day

Lovers of fantasy, young and old, should all hail the appearance of Michael Chabon's *Summerland* (Hyperion, hardcover, $22.95, 500 pages, ISBN 0-7868-0877-2). The very antithesis of commodified fantasy, this book exhibits rare emotion and invention, being rich with both event and meaning. Besides resonating with the work of such "adult" fantasists as John Crowley, Terry Bisson, James Blaylock, R.A. Lafferty, and Van Reid, *Summerland* is also part of the honorable lineage that includes C.S. Lewis's Narnia books, George MacDonald's *Princess* duology and L. Frank Baum's *Oz* tales. It's both mature and childlike, knowing and innocent, clear-eyed yet undespairing. I predict that it will endure as a classic.

Ethan Feld lives on quirky Clam Island with his widowed father. His summertime existence, unfortunately, is marred by the game of baseball. Ethan can't play to save his life, you see, and his father earnestly desires him to love the sport. What Ethan doesn't know—until he is visited by a dimension-hopping werefox named Cutbelly—is that not only his own individual life but also the life of the entire multiverse is going to depend on just how well Ethan can swing a bat.

Before we can say "through the magic wardrobe," Ethan and his friends Jennifer T. and Thor Wignutt have learned of the world tree that supports the multiverse, including the faerie realm of Summerland. This cosmic support is under assault from Coyote and his crew, who are determined to bring it down and end all creation. Somehow, it's up to this trio of children to stop Coyote, who has meanwhile kidnapped Mr. Feld. Making their way across the bright patchwork geography of Summerland, the children eventually recruit six more astonishingly variegated players to make a team that finds itself, after some valuable seasoning, facing Coyote's Hobbledehoys. And the score at the bottom of the ninth will signal either Ragnarok or salvation.

Chabon never talks down to his young-adult audience, nor does he denigrate or ironicize his creations to placate some theoretically superior adult readership. He manages to deal meaningfully with issues as abstruse as the Literature of Exhaustion and the price paid for selling one's soul to those in power, while at the same time including such child-pleasing tropes as farting giants. Fueling his tale with all the great American myths from Paul Bunyan and La Llorona on down (and, if I'm not misreading, an avatar of William Burroughs), Chabon has created a purely nativist folktale that does not repudiate popular culture but ennobles it. This book will make the reader proud of the best elements of contemporary culture—not always an

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easy feat to accomplish, in the face of the more lurid and cheapjack portions of modern life.

Of course, Chabon's prose is top-notch, his sentences unreeling gracefully, his metaphors sharp and fresh. (A citadel, for instance, is likened to "a pile of hammerheads.") All the characters are engaging, and the relationships among them ring true.

To read this book is to deprive all the Coyotes in this world of a portion of their cruel victories.

The Terror of Place

One of the prime components of horror fiction, it seems to me, is landscape, setting, venue. While it's easy to find worthy examples from other genres—SF, the mystery—which occur in nonspecific Everytowns, it's harder to point to good horror where very concretely described realworld locations are not crucial to the atmosphere and success of the tale. King's Maine, Ramsey Campbell's English villages, Lovecraft's Providence, Leiber's San Francisco—so often the most vivid horror arises from and is enmeshed in the streets and moors, alleys and forests of a unique locale. Like Antaeus, horror draws its strength from the native earth it touches.

Two examples of this particular distinction of horror-writing come to us today from writers equally well known for their fantasy and SF.

Don D'Ammassa's *The Servants of Chaos* (Leisure Books, mass-market, $5.99, 338 pages, ISBN 0-8439-5069-2) takes place in two locales: the Massachusetts seacoast town of Crayport, just north of Plymouth, and in HPL's old stomping grounds, Providence. Now, while you will not find Crayport on any maps, it is so solidly conjured up, and so much a part of the same revered and familiar Chthulian landscape that contains Innsmouth, that its tangibility is never less than substantial. As for Providence, scene of the latter half of the book, I can attest as a longtime resident of that city that D'Ammassa, a fellow Rhode Islander, has nailed the burg down quite nicely.

Steven Canfort, a marine biologist, has been sent to Crayport to sample its waters for a study. He instantly encounters muted hostility, but attributes it merely to a certain backwoods mentality. But events soon prove how wrong he is. Under the sway of a family called the Crawleys, the denizens of Crayport have made contact with immortal beings from another plane intent on taking over our world. Using human puppets who carry noxious bestial riders coiled within, these Old Gods have subverted the entire town. Steven's girlfriend, Alyson, arrives for a visit, and soon the two are plunged into a desperate fight to save their own lives and alert the world. When Crayport is abandoned by the plotters, who shift to Providence with a kidnapped Alyson, Steven follows, a lone opponent to the imminent apocalypse.

D'Ammassa's book is resolutely old-fashioned, in line with the character of Steven, our first-person narrator, who exhibits just enough of a modern patina and attitude not to appear overly retro. D'Ammassa is utterly respectful of the Mythos traditions, while still being bold enough to add new twists. His sharp, bright descriptions of the

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various otherworldly denizens are convincingly bizarre. The sustained cat-and-mouse game in Crayport summons up memories of Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* (1955). This authorial conservatism is a good thing generally, as the book moves forward in solid strides, alternating high action with more reflective, recapitulative moments. Occasionally, as in HPL's work, these two impulses—showing and telling—come into less convincing juxtaposition. For instance, when swimming to escape an island of unholy rites, Steven encounters a Leviathan raised by the Crawleys. At this point the narrative breaks for a long paragraph wherein Steven recalls his lifelong fascination with such creatures. Not the best place for such a digression.

Overall, however, you will be carried along by D'Ammassa's vigorous storytelling gifts. Just be sure to steer clear of that weird warehouse on the shores of Narragansett Bay.

Dale Bailey has been producing a slew of striking short stories for the magazines lately, and his first novel, *The Fallen* (Signet, mass-market, $6.50, 281 pages, ISBN 0-45-20763-7), is an ambitious venture indeed. If you combined the nasty grit of Jim Thompson with the Southern intrigue of Erskine Caldwell and the hill'n'holler Gothicism of Manly Wade Wellman, you just might approach the cornlikker high of Bailey's book.

Henry Sleep left the town of Sauls Run, West Virginia, a long time ago. But the death of his father—an apparent suicide—draws him back. He finds the town basically unchanged. But with new vision, he sees just how odd the place has always been. People don't die as often in Sauls Run (whether from natural causes or from violence) as they do elsewhere. Except every once in a while, when there's a spike of deaths. This peculiar setup seems to have something to do with the abandoned coal mines owned by the Holland family, currently headed by Perry Holland, Henry's old schoolmate. As Henry gradually reweaves himself into the fabric of the town, picking up with his old flame Emily and going head-to-head with the malign sheriff Harold Crawford, he begins to understand that only by revisiting the mines, the scene of a traumatic childhood event, will he discover the truth behind Sauls Run's protected nature.

Bailey employs multiple viewpoints to good effect, digging deeply into the psyches of his characters, particularly the twisted mentality of the killer sheriff. (Crawford's real name is Delbert Grubb, a tribute to the West Virginia writer Davis Grubb, best known for his *The Night of the Hunter* [1953]). Be warned that Crawford/Grubb's nastiness approaches stomach-turning levels. But Bailey earns these splattery moments by the earnestness and empathy of his other portraits.

Without revealing the climactic secret located deep under Sauls Run—a supernatural creature lives there; this much is known from page one—I can say that Bailey's efforts here are on a par with his other inventions. The nature of the beast and Bailey's evocation of its physicality are extremely well done. The massive snowstorm that cloaks the actions of the climax is another deft stroke nicely sustained.

Perhaps the most telling indica-

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tor of Bailey's desire to escape clichés in his narrative and rework stale horror tropes is the nature of Sauls Run's existential dilemma. Rather than being a typically cursed place, a wounded land that the hero must heal, it is rather an elysian venue where magic is draining away. And all the characters can realistically do is comfort each other as the brightness slips away, then reconcile themselves to rediscovering the residual mundane glories enjoyed by the rest of the world.

It's a telling coincidence that both D'Ammassa's book and Bailey's end with a marriage. After surviving horror, ordinary human rituals become extraordinary, and the places we inhabit never look the same.

Looking Forward to the Year 2003

The best way to discover the exact nature of Bruce Sterling's new nonfiction book, *Tomorrow Now* (Random House, hardcover, $24.95, 320 pages, ISBN 0-67946322-4), may be first to decide what it is *not*. It is not some kind of Hans Moravec- or Eric Drexler-style plunge into a promised techno-wonderland awaiting somewhere down the line. It's not some Frank Tipler-style high-minded thinkpiece on mankind's destiny. It's not straight reportage, journalism about all the cutting-edge R&D happening around the globe. No, it's none of these things uniquely, but rather a strange hybrid of all three modes, along with some exquisite ranting, nostalgic taking-stock, a few gobs of Weltschmerz and some uplifting daily affirmations. Fellow SF writers, looking to dash in and out of this book while light-fingeredly stealing neat gimmicks for their own future stories will be disappointed—the rest of us will be enthralled.

Although the book is subtitled "Envisioning the next fifty years," Sterling paints in broad strokes, offering several alternative timelines instead of a single fate, and generally posing more cogent questions than facile answers. This book honestly reflects the cultural confusion currently dominant, in the wreckage of the "belle époque," a period that Sterling dates from 1989 to 2001. Sure, Sterling as always in his journalism makes bold assertions and pronouncements, couched in his trademark wry brashness. But the reader senses that the author is more willing than ever to be proven wrong, especially when it comes to such looming catastrophes as the greenhouse effect and terrorism.

Sterling adopts a clever format for his book: borrowing Shakespeare's famous "Seven Ages of Man" speech, he divides humanity's concerns into seven "stages": the Infant, the Student, the Lover, the Soldier, the Justice, the Pantaloon, and Mere Oblivion. Obvious topics immediately accrue to these stages. The chapter on the Infant will feature speculation on the genetic engineering of embryos, the Soldier will concern postmodern warfare, and so on, down to life extension in Mere Oblivion. But just as often as Sterling examines such nascent technologies as ubiquitous computing, he also dissects current mindsets and cultural currents. Reflective of its title, Sterling's book focuses equally as much on the present as it does on the future. Much of the text reads like so-

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phisticated op-ed page exegesis pertaining to immediate events. A clear-eyed interpreter of the current scene, Sterling is never less than fascinating and quotable ("A suicide bomber has no encore"), especially when expressing certain contrarian viewpoints in his best Mark Twain fashion. But he never really achieves liftoff into a visionary state. It's as if he's a diver intent on building a springboard so solid (his multiplex depiction of 2003) that he creates a industrial-grade, triply redundant launch platform that outshines the eventual leap. It's certainly not that Sterling can't dream big—any casual survey of his fiction will disprove that—but rather that he's deliberately snaffled himself on this outing, forsaking even such mildly non-linear yet plausible speculations as the advent of the hydrogen economy or the creation of an AIDS vaccine, for a tight focus on today's headlines. Like William Gibson's newest novel, *Pattern Recognition,* Sterling's book presents the future as a *fait accompli.*

This book reminds me of none other than John Clute's *The Book of End Times* (1999). Both are heartfelt attempts to engage the ball of confusion that is our dangerous, perplexing present. Both offer a mix of sunshine and clouds. Perhaps no more honest book of futurism is possible at this dire moment in time.

The Brit Pack

If you took the hallucinatory fever visions of Charles Burns, Jim Woodring, and Salvador Dali, then added in the glossolalia of pop singer Beck, and finally fused it with the eccentric obsessiveness of William Burroughs and the slangy riffing of Ishmael Reed, you might end up with a monstrous creator resembling Steve Aylett. But such a book-spewing creature still would not totally capture Aylett's organic weirdness, which is fully on display in the final two books of his Accomplice Quartet.

In *Dummyland* (Gollancz, trade paper, £9.99, 119 pages, ISBN 0-575-07087-0), we once again encounter as our main actors the demented trio of Barny, Edgy, and Gregor, all citizens of the surreal city Accomplice, which hovers on the edge of nowhere. The first man is a holy fool who loves animals, the second a razor-thin opportunist, and the third an obese pervert. With Barny still the hate-object of the demon Sweeney and of Mayor Rudloe, there's plenty of nastiness afloat to motivate the antics. Add in a shifty lawyer named Max Gaffer and a runaway clockwork doll named Maquette, and there's brilliant confusion galore. The trial of Gregor for raping a statue that occupies Chapter 8 is the Marx-Brothers centerpiece of the book. Still, despite a wealth of slapstick, spiked with Aylett's usual stiletto-sharp apercus ("A stranger's just an enemy you haven't made yet."), this novel feels a bit like a holding action until the fourth book.

Indeed, Aylett pulls out all the stops in *Karloff's Circus* (Gollancz, trade paper, £9.99, 144 pages, ISBN 0-575-07089-7). First he brings in the titular circus from *outside* Accomplice, hinting at hitherto-undisclosed realms in his cosmology. This "Circus of the Heart's Shell" manages to outdo in strangeness the heretofore-unsurpassed daily bizareness

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of the city, what with its zombie aerialists and Killer Midgets. It's an LSD-vision of Charles Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao* (1935), filtered through Bradbury on ecstasy. In this book the hilarious extended setpiece is a boxing match between Gregor ("the Masked Inconvenience") and a demon named Trubshaw in Chapter 9, complete with sports commentary only slightly more inane than what we hear daily.

But underlying the non-stop wackiness of this climactic volume is a real sadness and melancholy, as Barny comes up against the limits of his idealism. Having lost the affections of his girlfriend Chloe Low, and having seen his house and menagerie disassembled, he becomes despondent and, on the point of victory over all his rivals, makes a fatal misstep. A coda removes a little of the sting, but without Barny, Accomplice just isn't the same, and it's probably time to quit the scene. Aylett's courage in rounding off his series so decisively is testament to his own faith—and ours—that he'll be back with even grander, Firesign-Theater-style romps in the future. As Mike Ablatia, car mechanic turned accidental angel, says, "An artist pulls love from chaos." Steve Aylett is one hell of an artist.

It's easy and common enough to compare a living SF writer to Cordwainer Smith, that unique purveyor of transhuman future myths. But oftentimes such comparisons rely on the contemporary writer shallowly employing a few superficial icons similar to Smith's patented ideological armamentarium. But as far as the really deep-rooted *otherness* of thought and narration that Smith exhibited, it's rarely enough that anyone today tries for such fictional effects.

One author who has proven that he can portray startling futures radically disengaged from our present, futures whose inhabitants, although human, are quintessentially *not us,* is Adam Roberts. His first novel, *Salt* (2000), explored a harsh world where two rival political systems waged overt and covert war against each other, in the manner of Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974). His sophomore effort, *On* (2001), was one the best tales of an ontologically warped world—gravity functions at right angles to the surface—since Christopher Priest's *Inverted World* (1974). Now, with his third book, *Stone* (Gollancz, trade paper £9.99, 261 pages, ISBN 0-575-07064-1), Roberts moves into pure Cordwainer Smith territory, that realm where the daily life of the galaxy's far-future citizens is radically estranged from everything we take for granted, where nigh-inconceivable social networks rule, and where the actions of a lone individual can have Götterdämmerung effects.

The loosely interlocked affinity of worlds known as the t'T occupy a region of space where FTL travel at many multiples of lightspeed is physically permitted. Adjacent regions permit only slower FTL or none at all. (Here we can observe Roberts fruitfully playing with the Vingean notions first advanced in *A Fire Upon the Deep* [1992].) Even in the t'T zone, however, FTL travel is constrained to small masses: thus individuals encase themselves and their one-person quantum-drives in protective foam and launch themselves solo from star to star. Such travel is not quite as risky as it would be for you or me,

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since all the citizens of t'T are protected by dotTech, the omnipresent nanomachinery that confers immortality and near-invulnerability. Such neighboring polities as the Palmettos and the Wheah do not employ dotTech or FTL travel, and are seen as savages.

In the utopian realm of the t'T, murder is virtually unknown. Our female narrator, the abnormal killer known only as Ae, is consequently a disturbing anomaly. Confined to a "jailstar," a prison cell literally within a sun, Ae is contacted by a mysterious outside intelligence that recruits her for a mission of inexplicable genocide. Aided to escape, Ae next embarks on a hegira across the t'T realm (a journey that allows Roberts to introduce us to a number of miraculous worlds). Confused, alternately elated and despondent, wanting to reform and yet also to kill again, Ae undergoes a quest for answers. Primarily a psychological journey, Ae's quest also becomes a murder mystery (with victim, means, motive, and prime mover unknown until the last minute) and a chase-thriller.

Roberts has Ae telling her story post-capture, using an inanimate stone—one of the few possessions in her ultimate prison—as her silent auditor. His embodiment of Ae's warped, posthuman persona is seamless and richly emotional. Saving the account of Ae's formative years until three-quarters of the way through the story, Roberts nonetheless fashions his protagonist into a fully rounded character whose dreams and nightmares become our own. Ae's depiction is matched by the speculative rigor with which Roberts fashions his exotic future, where the economy of scarcity has been replaced by the ability to fashion anything desired out of raw matter, remake the human form into a million exotic shapes, and hop from star to star on a whim.

After three very different books to date, Roberts has emerged as one of the key writers reinvigorating SF for a new century. Paul Linebarger would be proud.

It's exceedingly rare to find a debut novel as accomplished as Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon* (Gollancz, trade paper, £10.99, 404 pages, ISBN 0-575-07322-5; Del Rey, trade paper, $13.95, 384 pages, ISBN 0-345-45768-4). Inevitable comparisons to the initial smash that *Neuromancer* (1984) made will abound, not only because *Altered Carbon* is pure third-generation kick-ass cyberpunk, but also due to the fact that this book has been optioned by Hollywood for a cool million dollars. It remains to be seen if Morgan's career will soar to the same heights as Gibson's. His sophomore effort, *Broken Angels* (Gollancz, March 2003), a direct sequel, is just out in the UK as I write this, and its reception and quality will prove whether or not Morgan has the staying power of his literary forebears.

However, there is no gainsaying that *Altered Carbon* on its own merits is one hell of a ride.

The time is the twenty-sixth century. The setting is Earth, mainly the city of San Francisco. Here we find our narrator/protagonist Takeshi Kovacs, "sleeved" in a new body and set loose to find out the truth behind the apparent suicide of billionaire Laurens Bancroft. The client who hired Kovacs? It's Bancroft, the suicide victim himself. You see, Morgan's future involves

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fully recorded personalities downloaded into fresh bodies, "sleeves" that are either synthetics or clones or essence-wiped adult humans. Kovacs is an Envoy, a near-psychopathic trained killer-soldier from the stars, now installed in new flesh. The living Bancroft is derived from a backup copy of the dead man, and lacks the memories of his own final hours due to backup timing. Bancroft believes he was murdered, and details Kovacs to find his killer.

Almost instantly, Kovacs is plunged into the elaborate and deadly politics of both the local scene and the whole Earth milieu. A large cast of suspects, allies, enemies, and innocent bystanders complicates matters. There's Kristen Ortega, local cop, who just so happens to be the lover of the body Kovacs is wearing, that of a fellow cop uploaded out of his flesh to the penal Stack for various crimes. There're professional assassins Trepp and Kadmin, who are stalking Kovacs. There's the AI that runs the hotel Kovacs is staying at, the Hendrix, who becomes Kovacs's partner. There are organlegging doctors; hackers known as Dips who take byte-sized pieces of personality backups in transit; and an assortment of whores, drug-dealers, and other unsavory types. Most importantly of all, there's merciless crimelord Reileen Kawahara, with whom Kovacs has tangled before. When Kovacs begins to step on her toes, the violence amps upward.

Morgan has the essentials of noir fiction nailed down tight. The wisecracks in the face of death, the elaborate similes and metaphors ("less noise than a Catholic orgasm"), the institutional corruption, the way alliances get made despite principles rather than because of principles. The plot is more tangled than six Chandler novels put together, yet Morgan manages to unknot it all at the end. Kovacs is as nasty a hero as any outside of a James Crumley novel, yet we root wholeheartedly for him. And the speculative content is impeccable: a sharp central concept (reminiscent in many ways of the core notion in David Brin's recent *Kiln People*), lots of deadly hardware, and plenty of socio-political ramifications.

My one gripe is with the unlikelihood that five centuries have passed since our day. Morgan picks this distant era because he needs to set up a degenerate elite of ancient powerbrokers. (Bancroft and Kawahara are both three centuries old.) But would such things as the UN, tobacco cigarettes, and LED readouts survive unaltered over such a span? What institutions and customs remain to us from Shakespeare's time? It's much more likely that the passage of five centuries would result in a future more akin to that in Adam Roberts's novel. But once you get over this initial implausibility, the action of the book is freed to zigzag madly from one explosive action scene to another, all of them elaborately constructed and recomplicated. Morgan's unflagging attention to meticulous detail establishes the old saw about genius being an infinite ability for painstakingness.

Morgan shows us that, given a wealth of talent and ambition, no writer need be afraid to tackle any mode of fiction deemed played-out. All those who suspected that the landmark fusion of noir and SF that Gibson pioneered had been done to death are now proved wrong.

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Small Press Titles

Handsome in appearance, varied in content, the magazine *Flesh & Blood* (Flesh & Blood Press, chapbook, $5.00, 52 pages, ISSN 1524-1149) offers in its eleventh issue poems from Darrell Schweitzer and Jill Bauman, and stories from Forrest Aguirre, Teri Jacobs, and Cathy Buburuz, among others. I particularly relished Loren MacLeod's "Skyfisher," which manages to remake kite-flying into a savage pursuit, and Wendy Rathbone's Yeatsian verse "Jack, the Fairy King." Also from F&B Press comes a chapbook of poetry by Mark McLaughlin, *Professor LaGungo's Exotic Artifacts and Assorted Mystic Collectibles* ($5.00, 35 pages, ISBN unavailable). Known for his mordant humor and Gothic sensibilities, McLaughlin outdoes himself here. Structured as a tour of a warehouse of odd objects—the lipstick case of a Lemurian snake princess; a moon rock daubed in alien blood—this EC-Comics style creepfest will have you laughing till you expire. Contact Flesh & Blood Press at 121 Joseph Street, Bayville, NJ 08721.

From Shaman Press (11233 Tierrasanta Blvd., #32, San Diego, CA 92124) arrives a debut novel by Bruce Golden titled *Mortals All* (trade paper, $14.95, 248 pages, ISBN 1-58939-232-9). Golden's tale is steeped in the ambiance of classic 1950's *Galaxy* magazine, an editorial venue which, for good or ill, created such a strong template for a certain kind of SF storytelling that even now, fifty years after that magazine's heyday, we are still seeing new iterations of *Galaxy*'s trademark blend of social satire, irreverent anti-establishmentarianism, and pseudo-hardboiled narration. Our main protagonist here is Zach Starr, future SF hack writer in a world where androids do all the gruntwork. Naturally enough, these all-too-human slaves are ripe for rebellion, and, when Zach aids Mary 79, a rogue "androne," he finds himself rapidly crossing over to the wrong side of the law. The androids plan to escape to the small human colony on Ganymede, but their plans take an odd turn when an ostensibly anti-android preacher comes into the mix. Golden writes with zest and good pacing, his relatively short chapters oscillating among many points of view. But a certain flippancy of characterization and delivery insures that Sheckley, Kornbluth, Pohl, Dick, & Co. need not abandon their thrones quite yet.

Sometimes procrastinators score big. If you put off buying Frank Robinson's *Science Fiction of the 20th Century* (1999), or Robert Weinberg's *Horror of the 20th Century* (2000), or Randy Broecker's *Fantasy of the 20th Century* (2001), all from Collectors Press (POB 230986, Portland, OR 97281), you can now get these three volumes at a fraction of their original total cost in one humongous coffee-table compilation, *Art of Imagination* (hardcover, $99.95, 768 pages, ISBN 1-888054-72-7). Printed with the same gorgeous eye-popping colors as the originals, this mammoth volume features a new introduction by Robinson and a comprehensive three-in-one index. And thanks to incredible editorial foresight, there is practically no overlap of contents. Take one example, that of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* magazine. Robinson features several covers in his section of the book, none of which are later repeated in Broecker's double-page

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spread. The same is true, again, with Frankenstein imagery. Robinson provides a French film poster to contrast with Weinberg's US version. The text varies from deeply knowledgeable (Robinson and Weinberg) to a tad superficial (Broecker), but all the facts are arrayed in easily accessible prose. Although it may break your lap if you try to read it in bed, this book will provide endless hours of pleasure.

From Dark Regions Press (POB 1558, Brentwood, CA 94513) comes Ann Schwader's *Architectures of Night* (chapbook, $5.95, 50 pages, ISBN 0888993-35-9), one of the best collections of genre poetry I've seen in a while. Schwader's dark imaginings are arrayed in unconvoluted yet artful lines, as she deals unflinchingly with a host of somber topics. Her "Slouching Toward Entropy" deals with our shared post-9/11 mindset as cogently as any work of longer length: "[we] formulate the new survivor's question:/not what rough beast, but which rough beast this time?"

"Not Quite Human" postulates a bizarre method whereby aliens might initiate first contact with us. And "Angel of Mercy," quoted here entire, showcases Schwader's pitch-black humor: "all depends on just how/you define it/she says/as she sits there/flicking those/switchblade wings."

The new volume containing the collected correspondence of Donald Wandrei and H.P. Lovecraft, *Mysteries of Time and Spirit* (Night Shade Books, trade paper, $20.00, 439 pages, ISBN 1-892389-50-9), boasts all the heft and allure of an epistolary novel. There's the initial tentative meeting, via the intercession of Clark Ashton Smith, of the nineteen-year-old Wandrei and the thirty-six-year-old Lovecraft, followed by the enthusiastic yet formal introductory period, segueing into the jovial, big brother/little brother camaraderie of their later years. The men exchange views on their work, their respective cities, their philosophies of life, and a dozen other topics. On their separate travels, they send a flurry of postcards, often annotated by fellow members of the *Weird Tales* circle. Out of this blizzard of letters emerge bright portraits of both HPL and Wandrei. By the time Wandrei's final, unanswered 1937 letter to the departed HPL appears, it's easy to understand why the younger man founded Arkham House with August Derleth to preserve the literary legacy of their mentor. And of course, editors S.T. Joshi and David E. Schultz have introduced, footnoted and indexed the text with their usual high level of scholarship. Get your copy from Night Shade Books, 3623 SW Baird Street, Portland, OR 97219. ○

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SF Conventional Calendar

Don't forget upcoming WorldCons, though there's been no room here till now. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

SEPTEMBER 2003

12–14—**JVLCon.** For info, write: **1316 Monterey Lane, Janesville WI 53546.** Or phone: **(608) 756-5525** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) www.sl-finut.com/jvl-con. (E-mail) sifinut@charter.net.** Con will be held in: Janesville WI (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Ramada Inn. Guests will include: none announced at press.

11–14—**GateCon. (710) 574-6427. www.gatecon.com.** Best Western Richmond Inn, Vancouver BC. StarGate SG-1.

19–21—**Foolscap. www.foolscap.org.** Hilton, Bellevue WA. Greg Bear, Sergio Aragones. SF/fantasy literature and art.

19–21—**Nan Desu Kan. www.ndk.cc.** Holiday Inn DIA, Aurora CO. Tiffany Grant, Matt Greenfield. Anime.

19–21—**Midwest Construction. www.midfan.org.** Hawthorn Suites, Ann Arbor MI. Convention organizers talk shop.

19–22—**Oxonmoot. www.tolkiensociety.org.** St. Antony's College, Oxford UK. Lord of the Rings and Tolkien generally.

26–28—**Arcana, Box 8036, Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 721-5959. arcanacon@prodigy.net.** Gahan Wilson. Fantasy.

26–28—**To Be ConTinued, Box 1582, N. Riverside IL 60546. www.2becontinued.com.** Radisson, Merriville IN. Niven.

26–28—**Anime Weekend, Box 13544, Atlanta GA 30324. (404) 364-9773. www.awa-con.com.** Renaissance. S. Bennett.

26–28—**ConiFur NW, 1911 SW Campus Dr. #380, Federal Way WA 98023. www.conifur.org.** Tacoma WA. Furry fans.

26–28—**MonsterMania, 616 N. Delsea Dr., Glassboro NJ 08028. (856) 307-9124.** Clarion, Cherry Hill NJ. Horror film.

27–28—**P-Con, Yellow Brick Rd., 8 Bachelors Walk, Dublin 1, Ireland. www.slovobooks.com.** Ken MacLeod, J.P. Hogan.

OCTOBER 2003

2–5—**Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. (636) 326-3026. www.stlsf.org.** Collinsville IL. Stackpole, Bruce Honeck.

3–5—**ConText, Box 163391, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 889-0436. www.context.com.** Asaro, Flint. Written SF/fantasy.

3–5—**ConJecture, Box 927388, San Diego CA 92192. www.conjecture.org.** Doubletree, San Diego CA. Robert. C. Wilson.

3–5—**AngliCon, Box 75536, Seattle WA 98125. (206) 789-2647.** Radisson Airport. www.anglicon.com. British media.

3–5—**AniMagic, Box 221, Lancaster CA 93584. www.ani-magic.org.** Antelope Valley Inn. Anime.

3–5—**Cinema Wasteland, Box 81551, Cleveland OH 44181. www.cinemawasteland.com.** Holday Inn, Strongville OH.

3–5—**Earth 4: Aurora, Box 350, Weston super Mare BS23 3ZJ, UK. www.earth-iv.co.uk.** Radisson Heathrow, UK.

3–5—**Watkins Glen Weekend, Box 4233, Ithaca NY 14852. (607) 257-3480. www.ussaccord.org/wgw.** Star Trek.

3–5—**Nexus, c/o Völzer, Waldowstraße 53, Berlin 13403, Germany. www.nexuscon.de.** Estrel Hotel. Media.

3–6—**Filk Continental, c/o Jugendherberge, Burgstraße, Kirchen-Freusburg 57548, Germany.** SF/fantasy folksinging.

4–5—**Trek Celebration, 4623 Aminda, Shawnee KS 66226. (913) 441-9405.** El Paso TX. Commercial Star Trek event.

10–12—**ICon, 221 E. Market #201, Iowa City IA 52245. (319) 626-2099.** Clarion, Cedar Rapids IA. D. Drake, R. Hevelin.

10–12—**GrisseCon, 6 St. Leonards Ave., Stafford ST17 4LT, UK. www.britishfantasysociety.org.uk.** Storm Constantine.

10–13—**AlbaCon, Box 2085, Albany NY 12220. www.albacon.org.** Ramada, Schenectady NY. Bujold, Koszowski, Fish.

SEPTEMBER 2004

2–6—**Noreascon 4, Box 1010, Framingham MA 01701. www.noreascon.org.** Boston MA. William Tenn. WorldCon. $160.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—**Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow Scotland. $135/£85.

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NEXT ISSUE

DECEMBER SPECIAL HOLIDAY ISSUE

Next issue is our December Special Holiday Issue, and, in accordance with long tradition, it features a Christmas story. And if you're going to run a Christmas story, you might as well get one from the best Christmas story writer in the business . . . which is exactly what we've done, as our December issue features a wry yet suspenseful novella by multiple Hugo and Nebula winner **Connie Willis**, one that warns us to be careful what we wish for, and which obediently delivers a Christmas "Just Like the Ones We Used to Know." *Sort* of.

But if you're the sort who refuses to get into a holiday mood and sulks grouchily through the Twelve Days of Christmas, don't despair. The *rest* of our December issue turns far from holiday concerns:

OUR STELLAR CAST

Hot new(ish) writer **Charles Stross**, in the latest of his "Accelerando" sequence (which has included the Hugo finalist "Lobsters" and the current Hugo finalist "Halo") depicting the adventures of Manfred Macx and his daughter Amber, takes us to a *very strange* far-future and to the remote outer reaches of the solar system (or what's *left* of the solar system anyway, the rest of it having been eaten for fuel by intelligent machines) for a momentous encounter with an enigmatic "Curator"; popular British "hard science" writer **Stephen Baxter** plunges us into the middle of a horrific, galaxy-spanning future war, and takes us out to where the shooting starts, on a harrowing tour of "The Chop Line"; new writer **Liz Williams** hurries us along to catch a glimpse of the long-vanished past, which turns out to be a bit different from the way you probably thought it was, as we meet "Tycho and the Stargazer"; **John Alfred Taylor** returns to treat us to a Lunar adventure that takes place "Way Out on the Regolith"; and new writer **Michael Bateman** opens up the hood under dangerous conditions to tinker with some "Mortal Engines."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column taps enquiringly on a "Heart of Stone"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column goes trolling for some "Slipstream"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our festive December Special Holiday Issue on sale at your newsstand on October 14, 2003, or subscribe today (you can also now subscribe online, or order *Asimov's* in downloadable formats, at our website, *www.asimovs.com*) and be sure to miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you this year! And remember that a gift subscription to *Asimov's* makes a *great* present at *any* time of the year, not just at Christmas time!

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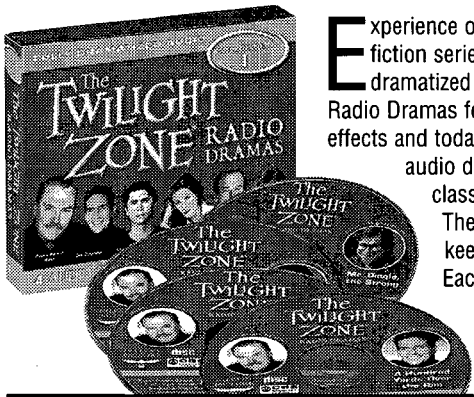

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